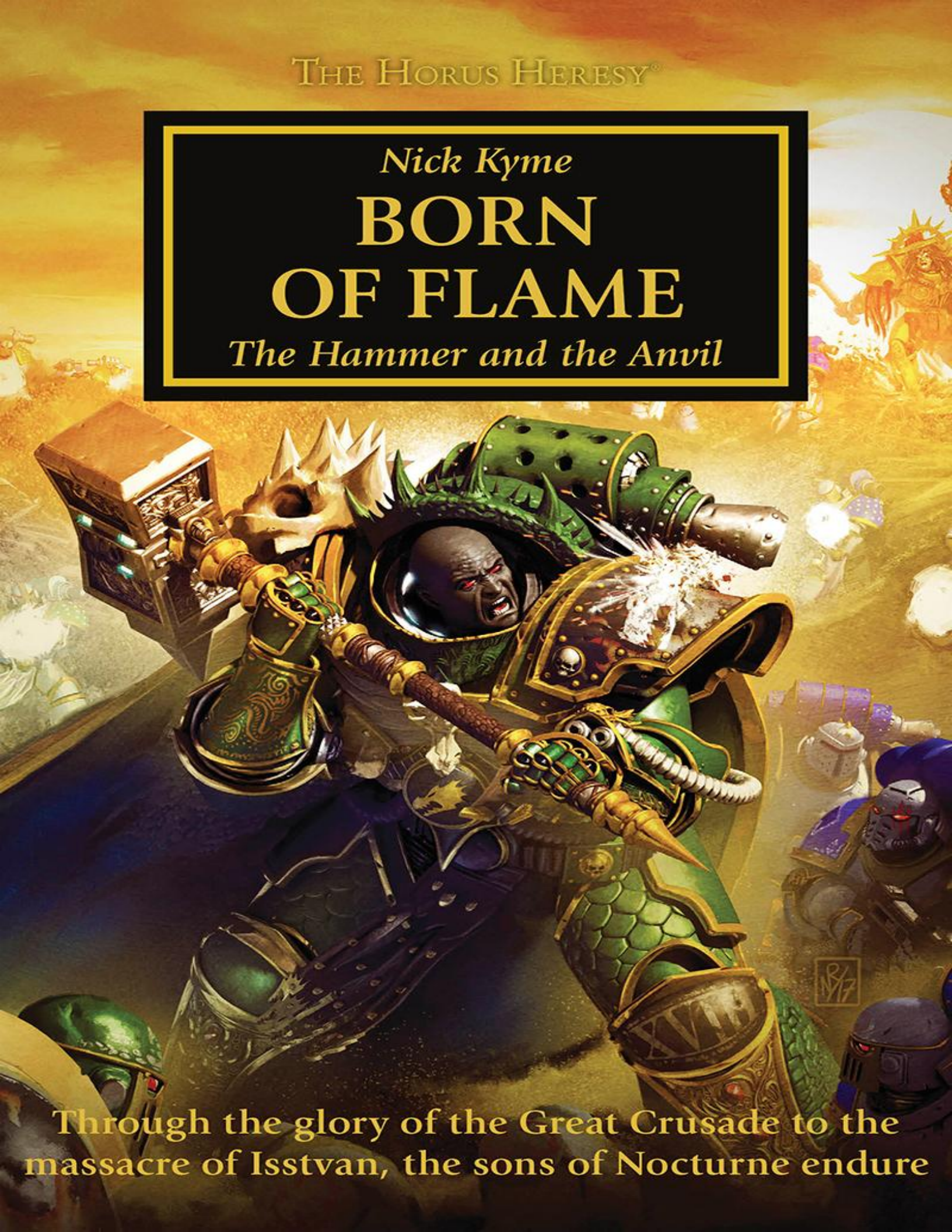
THE HORUS HERESY®

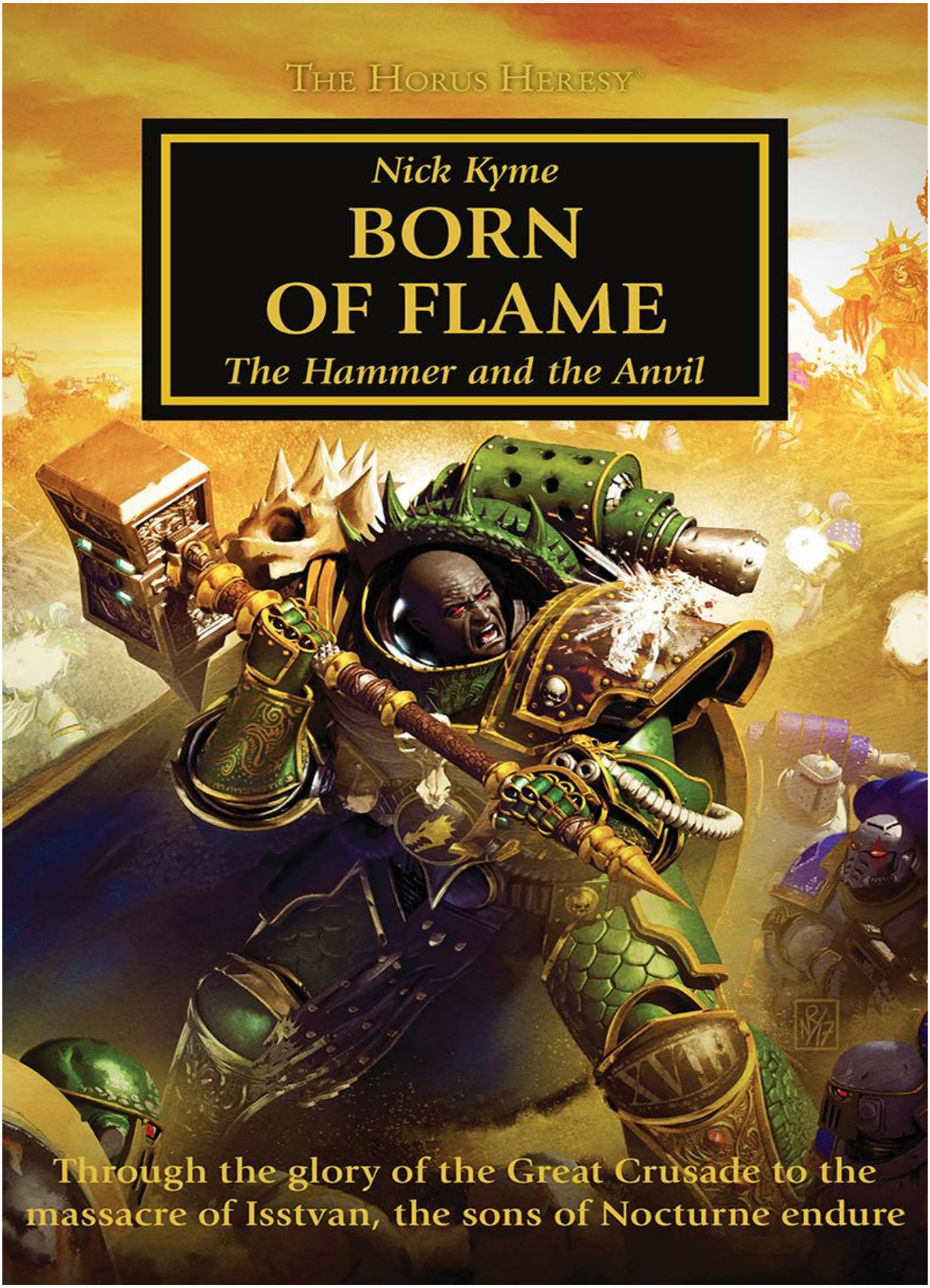
Nick Kyme

BORN OF FLAME

The Hammer and the Anvil



Through the glory of the Great Crusade to the massacre of Isstvan, the sons of Nocturne endure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Through the glory of the Great Crusade to the massacre of Isstvan, the sons of Nocturne endure

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BORN OF FLAME

The Hammer and the Anvil

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

PROMETHEAN SUN

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The XVIII Legion, 'Salamanders'

Vulkan , Primarch

Numeon, Captain, First Company and leader of the Pyre Guard

Varrun, Pyre Guard

Atanarius, Pyre Guard

Ganne, Pyre Guard

Leodrakk, Pyre Guard

Skatar'var, Pyre Guard

Igataron, Pyre Guard

Heka'tan, Captain, 14th Company

Kaitar, Battle-brother, 14th Company

Luminor, Apothecary, 14th Company

Angvenon, Battle-brother, 14th Company

Tu'var, Battle-brother, 14th Company

Oranor, Battle-brother, 14th Company

Bannon, Sergeant, 14th Company

Gravius, Captain, Fifth Company

Venerable Brother Attion, Dreadnought

The XIV Legion, 'Death Guard'

Mortarion, Primarch

The X Legion, 'Iron Hands'

Ferrus Manus, Primarch

Gabriel Santar, Captain, First Company

The 154th Expeditionary Fleet

Glaivarzel, Remembrancer, imagist

Verace, Remembrancer

Imperial Army

888TH PHAERIAN, Army division, including cadre of overseers and discipline-masters

Of ancient Nocturne

N'BEL, Blacksmiter of Hesiod

BREUGHAR, Metal-shaper of Hesiod

GORVE, Plainskeeper of Hesiod

REK'TAR, Hornmaster of Hesiod

BAN'EK, Tribal king of Themis

Other

'THE OUTLANDER'

‘I don’t understand. You raised me. You taught me how to hunt with spear and bow. I lived in your house and worked in your forge. Yet you ask me to believe that I am not your son?
So who is my father?’

– Vulkan of Nocturne

No one saw him die. The jungle just came alive and took him. Soundlessly, the trooper was simply gone. His slayer moved as a blur, blending with the shadows until it was lost in the heat haze. Scant light penetrated the dense leaf canopy above. Men, shouting and panicking in a tightly packed column, went for their lamp packs. It was stifling in the heady gloom. Heat thickened the air, but the troopers' bodies cooled with growing fear. Stabbing light beams sent night-beetles scurrying for dark hollows. Vine serpents hung inert in mimicry of their namesakes in hope of being overlooked. If only the men could play dead like that and the predator would pass… Flat leaves, that were not really leaves at all, heaved and pulsed, but there was no sign of the monster. Cries of panic subsided, usurped by a quiet tension as the jungle swallowed voices and stole the soldiers' resolve. The discipline-master of the 888th Phaerian Imperial Army held up a clenched fist.

Still. Stay still… and listen. If we listen, we will live.

His brocade and jacket seemed incongruous amongst his bare-and barrel-chested charges. Phaerian death-worlders were brutish, slab-muscled men used to deltas and trackless swamps. Skulls jangled on their bandoliers, the rictus mouths clacking as if in amusement. Camo tattoos striped their pugnacious faces but couldn't hide their fear. This was supposed to be their element.

Hearts beating in two thousand chests made a louder clamour than the entire jungle in that moment. The forest held its breath.

Lifting his puniter-stave, the discipline-master was about to order the advance when the cyber-hawk perched on his shoulder shrilled. The warning was too late. As if exhaling again, the jungle opened its maw and the discipline-master disappeared. One moment he was there, the next he was gone. Just like the trooper. They were being picked off.

Snap fire from a dozen rifles chased the hole left by the discipline-master but the trail was cold before the soldiers had time to realise they were aiming

at nothing. Order went with him, Army overseers powerless to prevent the two thousand-strong infantry group from unleashing carnage with their auto-carbines and scatter-locks. Hot las and solid shot spat out in all directions as the men vented their fear until their mags ran dry. Sections of Rapier and Tarantula gunners added heavier firepower to the barrage. The thick jungle in the immediate vicinity became a mulched flatland in under a minute. Electro-goads and vox-amplified orders bellowed at ear-bleeding volume eventually brought the madness under control.

A dumb quietude fell, undercut by heavy breathing and nervous whispers.

The cessation was brief.

Out of the darkness came monsters. Vast beasts, their ululating cries louder than any augmented overseer, crashed into the column of men, killing Phaerians by the score. On one flank, the line bent and broke as hulking, scaled things with horned snouts armoured by bony carapace drove into it. The first Phaerians to die were ground to paste, whilst those that came next were thrown into the air or gored to death. Other beasts, smaller but still many times larger than a man, bullied in alongside the hulks. Saurian like their larger cousins, but avian in nature and aspect, they cantered and sprang amongst the shattered platoons, rending with dewclaws. With their coherency so brutally broken, the scattered Phaerians were easy meat. Hooded riders snapped off shots with long, alien rifles, their conical helms gleaming pearlescent white.

From above, a shriek split the air and a second later, the leaf canopy was broken by a flock of winged lizards. A lucky burst of Rapier fired chewed up the membranous wings of one, sending rider and beast into a fatal dive, but the rest of its kindred reduced the jubilant Army gunners to a visceral mist.

The air was thick with blood and screaming as the tattered regiment consolidated into the clearing they’d made. Not so much a column now, the slowly diminishing circle of bodies offered feeble resistance to the aliens and their scaled beasts. It was no place for a last stand, and soon the Imperial Army was running again, back through the darkness. Branch tendrils came alive snagging wrists and ankles, sucking bogs opened up to swallow men whole. Insect hordes rallied, filling mouths and ears as the entire jungle animated to repel the interlopers.

‘Forward for Terra!’ an overseer began, before his throat was speared by an alien lance. Its bearer shucked his body free with a desultory jerk before

rearing over a band of wounded Phaerians on its saurian steed. The meaning in the alien’s glowering gaze was clear.

Death to intruders.

It charged. A reverberant war cry shot through the jungle like lighting, calling its rider kindred, and in moments the Phaerians were engulfed by a stampede. The crack of scatter-locks and auto-carbines was brief and ineffectual. Rear rankers, far enough from the fighting to not yet be skewered, crushed or shredded, just ran. These men, these death-worlder brutes, wailed as they scrambled through the heat and the mire. Winged beasts, let loose in the rein, dived on prey at leisure, picking off morsels wherever they appeared, all to the grim satisfaction of their eldritch masters.

It was a massacre, the humans were a flesh feast for the cold-blooded saurian monsters.

High above, the forest was an ocean of fire. Leaves of red and ochre filled the swollen canopy like veins of blood rippling on water. Hunting pterosaurs were visible darting through the unseen fissures in the solid orange sea.

A voice echoed in the darkness of a ship’s belly.

‘They have engaged the Army vanguard, my lord.’

A large figure near the back of the hold breathed in the scent of ash and cinder. Somewhere behind him, the last embers of a ritual fire were slowly fading. Brazier-flame lit his eyes as he looked up. In the gloom, he appeared as scaled and saurian as the monsters in the jungle below.

Abyssal deep, his reply was emphatic.

‘Send in the Legion.’

A heavy engine throb forced its way into the jungle. Below, where the chaos played out and the reaping of human life went unabated, a few surviving Phaerians looked up. As if by some unseen hand, the canopy parted to reveal the slab-sided base of a gunship. Its boarding ramp was down and the darkness within the Stormbird’s belly lit up with a host of firered lenses as its occupants concluded their oaths of moment.

The first of the warriors hit the ground with a thunderous boom. Chainblade whirring, the giant in forest-green levelled his bolt pistol.

‘Rally! For the freedom of humanity and the glory of Terra!’

Like thunderbolts striking the earth, he was joined by others, armour-clad crusaders bearing the symbol of the snarling drake on their shoulder guards.

We are fireborn.

They roared as one.

‘Vulkan!’

He had fought the eldar before, though not like this. Attached to the 154th Expeditionary Fleet, he’d been charged with fighting off piratical raiders, an entirely different alien breed to the jungle-dwellers. They had been succubus horrors, draped in leather and festooned with charnel blades. Emerging from space as if an autonomous part of the void had detached itself from the whole, the raiders had gutted two frigates before the XVIII Legion intervened and repelled them. Nocturneans called them ‘dusk-wraiths’. They were phantoms, soul-thieves, and he hated them with all the ingrained cultural memory of his people.

Heka’tan had not crossed blades with the dragon-riders before this battle. These forest-bound aliens were not as technologically advanced as their cousins but they were still eldar. And they were fast.

‘Cutting left.’ The warning vocalised through his squad’s comm-feed also displayed as an icon in his retinal lens. His bolt pistol was still scanning, spitting out semi-auto at an enemy so fleet of foot his targeter couldn’t keep up. Foliage split apart under the barrage.

‘Burst fire.’

The legionaries stopped aiming and focussed on areas instead. A furious combined salvo brought down the rider and three of its kindred.

Heka’tan saw Brother Kaitar kneel and daub a finger of ash down his shoulder guard from the smouldering remains of one of the fires littering the clearing.

‘Unto the anvil, captain.’

Heka’tan smiled behind his faceplate and gave Kaitar a curt salute. He opened up the company-band feed.

‘All of the Fourteenth. Advance.’

Multiple Stormbirds had broken through the forest canopy, bringing warriors of the XVIII Legion to relieve the beleaguered Army. They consolidated quickly and methodically, Vulkan’s sons as exacting as their father when it came to warmaking.

Several squads from Heka’tan’s company came together and a wall of bolter fire lit up the jungle, chasing back the darkness and chewing up trees into kindling. The eldar vanguard withered before it. Pterosaurs took flight, spearing through gaps in the leaf canopy, calling out vengeance. A blockade of stegosaurs emerged from behind a fleeing screen of raptor riders in an attempt to impede the legionaries.

With clipped battle-sign, Heka’tan brought up a division of heavies.

Capacitors powered from a soft drone to a hard thrum as the conversion beamers reached fire-ready status. A crackling *foom* rushed from the aiming nozzles as the energy weapons sliced foliage apart to detonate with purpose against the stegosaurs. An explosion engulfed the beasts, leaving nothing behind but wet bone chunks.

Two fingers snapping forwards in a quick *chop-chop* motion brought up the bolters again. Heka’tan led the line, holstering his pistol as the Salamanders took control of the battlefield. Slowly, the resolve of the Army units was returning. The appearance of the Legiones Astartes had emboldened them as the Salamanders marched implacably through the shaken Phaerians.

Heka’tan glowered at an Army overseer who was trying to restore order in his platoon.

‘Bring your men with me, soldier.’

The overseer gave a sharp salute at the captain. ‘For the glory of Terra and the Emperor!’ He turned to bellow at his men with greater vigour. Across the jungle expanse, the Salamanders were wrangling control of the Army units and clearing a path. With the Legion as a spear-point, the Army would move behind them in support.

Despite the death of the stegosaurs and the multiple defeats being inflicted across the two-kilometre stretch of jungle where the Salamanders had touched down, the eldar were tenacious. From the backs of their lizard-steeds, riders put up a whickering salvo of rifle fire. Pterosaurs executed lightning attacks on the legionaries until they’d lost too many to the Salamanders bolters. A baying stegosaur stomped defiantly until a missile burst tore it open. As the beast died, it rolled over and crushed a pair of raptor riders.

Against the Legiones Astartes, the hit and run tactics of the eldar were blunted.

As the Salamanders advanced, the jungle ahead of them began to change. Branches entwined together, leaves and vines thickened to form a union. Within minutes an arboreal impasse had grown in front of the legionaries. Through the retinal lenses of his battle-helm, Heka’tan could still detect multiple body traces from the enemy where they waited in the gloom. The faster-moving elements of the eldar force were already circling again. Raptor packs bounded across his peripheral vision in a colourful heat blur while

pterosaur kindreds found perches in the highest trees from where they could launch an ambush.

The icon of Fifth-Sergeant Bannon flashed up alongside targeting data on Heka'tan's left retinal lens as the captain opened up a channel.

'Hell and flame, brother.'

An affirmation symbol flashed once before the entire Salamanders front line withdrew and fell back to suppressing fire protocols.

The Army overseer, whose platoon was joined to Heka'tan's squad, took this as a cue to drive the rallied Phaerians forward, until the legionary stopped him.

'Not yet,' he said, holding the human back.

'We are ready to die for the Emperor's glory, my liege!'

'And so you shall, human, but step forward now and your death will serve no cause at all.' Heka'tan gestured with his chainsword at movement within the Salamanders ranks.

Sergeant Bannon brought six flamer squads to the front of the line.

'Hell and flame!'

His cry was answered by a pulsating wave of superheated promethium. The jungle shrivelled in the conflagration. On the flanks, incendiaries went up where the circling raptors made contact with the chains of frag grenades laid by Salamanders Scouts operating unseen at the fringes of the battle zone.

Drop-ships filled the sky now, the flames savaging the jungle reflected on their metallic underbellies. Blackened tree stumps and crisped plant-life broke apart in the downdrafts from the Stormbirds' descent thrusters. Ash laced the breeze. Everything burned.

Heka'tan's gaze was drawn skywards as the firestorm raged. One ship, apart from the others, had yet to disgorge those within its hold.

'Father is not joining us.'

Gravius had noticed the primarch's absence too.

Heka'tan's fellow brother-captain was close enough to see him eyeing the smoke-wreathed heavens. His Fifth Company was advancing alongside. Over four hundred Legiones Astartes to tame a simple stretch of jungle – the word 'overkill' sprang to mind.

Heka'tan replied on a closed channel. 'He'll come soon, Gravius,' he said. 'When he's needed.'

But the lonely Stormbird's ramp stayed shut.

In the ship’s hold, the heat was beyond human endurance.

The warriors within didn’t sweat. Their breathing was even in their scalloped, draconian armour. Their steady exhalations made the air redolent with the tang of sulphur.

One warrior stood apart from the rest. A serrated halberd was clasped in his gauntleted fist. Sharp dragon teeth half the length of gladii ran up the sides of his battle-helm, which he held in the opposite hand. Though the deck rumbled violently with the force of the Stormbird’s engines, he remained statue-still. A crest of lava-red hair, like a blade, cut his bald scalp into two perfectly even hemispheres. He kept his head bowed as he addressed the giant towards the back of the hold.

‘The Legion has taken to the field. Do we engage, my lord?’

The abyssal voice answered, ‘Not yet. Hold, as the anvil tempers them.’

Breath fogging the air through his mouth grille, Heka’tan checked his armour’s autosenses. Temperature readings were below freezing. Hoarfrost crystallising the surrounding ravaged trees made him discount a system malfunction. Ice and snow were extinguishing the fiery purge. Reacting to the assault, Bannon pressed harder and ordered his battle-brothers to open up their flamer nozzles. Hot light flared briefly but the creeping frost intensified, slowing pegging the flames back.

Promethium burned quickly. Sergeant Bannon couldn’t sustain the firestorm much longer before a reload was needed. By now, frost-rimed leaves and snow-dusted trails flecked with frozen pools supplanted the fire-blackened wasteland created by the flamers. Blasted trees became crystal sculptures, wizened plant fronds were transformed into ice-bladed fans as an eldritch winter swept impossibly over the jungle. Behind the aggressive cold front, the thaw came just as swiftly. From under the snow, leaves were reborn anew. Fresh buds poked from the ash, growing from saplings to fully fledged trees in moments. The tropical heat was reasserted and the destruction wrought by the Salamanders largely undone.

There could be only one explanation Heka’tan knew of.

He hissed into the feed. ‘The aliens have psykers nearby. Seek them out.’

Hunting the witches proved unnecessary. They emerged from the forest, coursing with green lightning. A bolt struck a legionary in the chest, announcing the psykers’ presence. Tiny ripples of energy arced from the impact point as Brother Oranor quivered in electro-shock. Before his smoking armour-carcass hit the ground, his squad responded. Bolter

explosions blossomed and dissipated against a psychic shield warding the eldar as the Salamanders vented their rage impotently. The twelve-strong coven psy-crafted in tandem, aggressing and defending alternately. Invisible kine-shields bloomed ephemerally with incandescent missile strikes. Flamer bursts flared against the psychic wards in lurid, oily colour, but the witches were left unscathed to unleash tendril-lightning into the legionaries that split battleplate with ease.

Above the roar of the storm, Heka'tan listened hard.

'Singing, brother-captain?' asked Luminor, his Apothecary.

Heka'tan nodded slowly. He saw a bare-headed witch amongst the coven. Indeed, her lips were moving with the foul canting of the song.

'It is sorcery. Close your senses to it.'

Brother Angvenon was at the captain's opposite shoulder, and gestured with the bladed sarissa on his bolter. 'Something is happening…'

Too late, Heka'tan saw the danger.

'Fall back!'

Spewing from the ground, a great tangling thorn snared the Salamander vanguard as the eldar used their witchery to turn the jungle against them. The supporting Army units were choked and crushed. Heka'tan lashed out with his chainsword, but the mechanism was quickly fouled and overwhelmed. The snagged teeth churned to a halt. He struggled against the binding strands but the roots and vines lashed around his limbs and pulled. Corded muscle in his arms and back bunched with the effort of trying to escape. He reached for the Army overseer but he and his men were quickly smothered. Their crooked fingers went into spasm as they died and then disappeared completely as the jungle consumed them.

A subtle change in the witch's siren song caused the serpentine roots to contract further, pulling down weapons and dragging on limbs. Though they fought it, the Salamanders were getting sucked into the earth like the human soldiers before them.

'Turn!' Sergeant Bannon rotated his flamers to engage the living jungle but all six squads were enveloped before they could release what was left of their fuel canisters.

The entire front line of the Salamanders was entangled by the choking and crushing vegetation, stalling the assault.

The whooping cry of the raptor riders cut through the air, followed by the deep droning of stegosaurs. Shadows of pterosaurs wheeling and diving

from above flashed across the Salamanders' armour.

'Fight yourselves free! Retaliate!' Heka'tan broke a wrist loose and sketched a line of explosive bolter fire into the clinging morass. His honour guard did the same, chainblades and gladii hacking at the possessed foliage.

Ahead of him, he could hear the eldar returning.

This time, they were not alone.

A low bellow shook the ground under Heka'tan's feet. He paused in freeing his sword-arm to follow the source of the sound. From the arboreal depths, a pack of massive alpha-predators joined the reinvigorated eldar assault. Three times the height of a legionary, heavily muscled with taut sinews and scaled hide, the carnodons were immense. Though not as bulky as a stegosaur, they exchanged mass for killing speed and a pair of deadly, saw-toothed jaws. Cold intelligence blazed in the monsters' eyes, the eldar riders on their backs as imperious as feral jungle kings.

The predator pack broke in front of the rallying eldar, easily outpacing the smaller raptors and cumbersome stegosaurs. Even the pterosaurs, their riders circling the field like carrion-eaters, were reluctant to attack with the carnodons so close.

Ensnared, Heka'tan knew the Salamanders would take heavy losses. On the right flank, he saw Venerable Brother Attion rip free of his arboreal bonds and counter-charge one of the alpha-predators. The Dreadnought slugged it with his power fist, releasing a spray of blood from the monster's snout. He tried to bring his heavy bolter to bear but the beast battered it down with its claw and the barrage chewed up earth instead of flesh.

Seizing the carnodon's neck with his power fist, Attion held its snapping jaws at bay as he attempted to wrestle it down. The pistons in the warrior's legs strained against the beast's ferocious strength. His helmeted head, not so unlike those of his brothers, showed no hint of emotion, though the retinal lenses glowed in simulation of a Salamander's fiery gaze and the servos whining in the mechanisms feeding power to his arms betrayed the struggle that was playing out between monster and man-machine.

Attion released a spit of flame from a shoulder-mounted weapon and for a moment he had the upper hand, before the carnodon's massively thick tail whipped out and swept the Salamander's legs from under him. Attion lost his grip on the creature's throat and fell.

Behind his faceplate, Heka'tan's eyes widened. He'd never seen a Dreadnought downed so easily. They were warriors-eternal, honoured with

interment in a potent suit of monstrous battle armour. Before Attion could retaliate, the monster had clamped its jaw around the torso section that housed the venerable warrior's atrophied body and squeezed.

Oaths of moments and scrolls of parchment were severed by the creature's razor-sharp fangs and loosed on the heady breeze. Decades of honourable deeds, promises of valour and loyalty disappeared in seconds. Impossibly hard adamantium buckled and creaked under the incredible pressure being exerted by the carnodon. Fissures ran up the torso section, widening to cracks as they met Attion's helmet. All the while, the eldar rider looked on with hard-faced detachment. The Salamander's sepulchral refuge was torn open. Beady, feral eyes regarded a legionary awash with blood-flecked amniotic fluid. The carnodon emitted a bellow to express its prowess and hunger. Red-rimed fangs were exposed in a brutal snarl, presaging Attion's fate. He had fought during the Unification Wars and had been amongst the first of the Eighteenth to be born on Terra. It was not a fitting end for such a warrior.

After it was done, the carnodon lifted its ruddy snout, not yet gorged with the small morsel Attion had provided. The monster's rider lifted its power lance, summoning the others.

Heka'tan's struggles redoubled.

Bannon's flamers were the next to bear the brunt. Several legionaries were crushed underfoot upon impact with the carnodons, their battleplate dented and scraped by claw marks. Another was bitten in half, the beast tossing the warrior about like a rag before the torso parted.

Superhuman blood and viscera rained down on the dead Salamander's battle-brothers, invoking their anger. The same beast went for Bannon but the sergeant had his chainblade free and gouged a ragged line along the carnodon's nose. Shed scales fell with a gush of the monster's blood, anointing his small victory. Bannon tried to shift his body to defend against another attack but the root bindings slowed him enough for a second beast to rip off his arm. Bannon fought on with his bolt pistol, bleeding profusely and screaming defiance at the monsters.

Heka'tan was watching, still half-pinned by the jungle, when the sergeant's voice crackled over the comm-feed. His breath was ragged and speech didn't come easy for him.

'We're done for, captain…'

The lesser saurians were coming, picking off the injured, snapping at each other as they fought for dominance and for kills.

The flamers were already being butchered. Seven of the monsters roamed amongst them, killing and maiming. As soon as the lesser raptors reached them…

Heka'tan clenched his teeth. Bannon was lost.

'Go with glory, brother. You will be remembered.' The captain would make certain of it. His account to the remembrancers would leave out no detail of the sergeant's heroism.

Bannon gave his last reply. 'In Vulkan's name…'

A blistering firestorm erupted across the jungle a few seconds later. Carnodons and the more eager raptors were engulfed by it as Bannon's men detonated their flamers. The blaze swept across the front line, bathing the Salamanders in a cleansing fire, reducing the strangling roots to powder.

Of the entangled Army units in the vanguard, there was no sign. A few Salamanders lay dead or seriously injured, some half submerged by the earth.

Heka'tan shouted into the comm-feed. 'Avenge them!'

Debris from the burned vegetation swathed the battlefield in sepulchre-grey. Heka'tan and the survivors powered through the dirty snowfall of drifting flakes. Ahead of them, where the flamers had given their lives, seven barrow-like mounds stood upon the killing field. They were only dormant for a few seconds before each one collapsed in a deluge of displaced ash. Singed but very much alive, the carnodons emerged from the ash mounds and gave a collective roar as they charged the Salamanders rushing to meet them.

Only a few of Bannon's flamers had perished in the firestorm. Many, though blackened and burned, got to their feet and joined their brothers. Salamanders were a tenacious breed but it would take more than a stubborn refusal to die to defeat the monsters.

Heka'tan's rallying shout became a scream resonating with the sound of his chainblade. Targeting matrices within his battle-helm aligned over one of carnodons on a direct collision course. This was the pack leader, the one that had killed Attion. Gathering momentum with every massive stride, it carried an amount of force equivalent to a battle tank. Its fangs were as long as Heka'tan's chainblade and could shred his battleplate with the ease of a

power axe. No man, not even a Space Marine, could hope to stand against such a monster…

But then Vulkan was so much more than either.

The primarch landed in front of Heka'tan like a scaled god. His battle-armour was ancient and inviolable, fashioned by his own hand. Dragon heads and fiery iconography wrought from rare quartz made it ornate and unique. Overlapping plates of deep sea green, scalloped at the edges, promoted a reptilian aspect. One shoulder guard bore the head of Kesare, a beast he had slain long ago. The other was draped with his mantle, a scaled cloak of near-impregnable firedrake hide. Behind the snarling faceplate of his drake-helm were eyes as deep as lava chasms, the heat of their intensity rising off the primarch in a palpable aura. Drake cloak flaring with the engine wash of the Stormbird above, he brandished his forge hammer and a crackle of caged lightning ran up the haft.

When he spoke it was like the shifting of the earth, as if his voice possessed the power to demolish mountains.

'I am Vulkan, and I have killed fiercer beasts!'

The carnodon slowed. Doubt flashed in its eyes.

The eldar upon its back shrieked a clipped command. Its tattooed face was bare and showed all of the alien's hate for the intruders.

Baring its fangs, the monster rallied and opened its jaw wide for a killing lunge.

Squaring his massive armoured shoulders, Vulkan gripped his hammer two-handed and swung. He was fast, faster than anyone wielding such a weapon had any right to be, and it took the eldar and its mount by surprise. The impact was spectacular. A grisly fusion of bone chips, brain matter and blood exploded where the carnodon's head had been. A tremor rippled from the blow, pushing Heka'tan and the onrushing Salamanders to their knees. It fed outwards in an expanding shockwave, hitting the other carnodons, who reeled and careened into one another before crashing to the ground. The darting raptor packs were flattened. Riders tumbled. Momentum carried the beheaded monster in its death throes, carving a deep trench in the earth that became its grave.

Vulkan ignored it and drove at the monsters that still drew breath.

Seven warriors armoured in drake scale, bearing blades and bludgeons each unique in design, joined him.

He roared to the Pyre Guard, 'Slay them!'

The hammer hand swung again. Three more times, lightning erupted from the god-weapon, equalled by the tally of carnodon bodies left broken and dead upon the charnel ground.

Inspired by their liege-lord, the Salamanders cut the rest apart.

Glory-fire burned in Heka'tan's blood. To fight upon the same field as the primarch was a singular honour. He felt emboldened and empowered. The anvil had broken some, but he was alive and tempered into unbreakable steel. By the time it was over, his throat was hoarse and his heart sang with the litany of war.

He caught Gravius's eye across the shattered corpses of the aliens.

'Unto the anvil, brother.'

Heka'tan saluted. 'I told you he would come. Glory to the Legion.'

'Glory to Vulkan,' Gravius replied.

The last of the eldar fled, swallowed by the jungle.

Heka'tan watched them go. His gaze went to Vulkan. How often had the primarch saved his sons from certain destruction, turned the tide and fought on when all had seemed lost? The Salamanders were one of the smallest Legions, but they had served the Great Crusade with pride and honour. Heka'tan could not imagine a time when it would not be so. Vulkan was as stalwart and unshakeable as the earth. He would ever be their father. No feat would ever be too much for him, no war too great that he could not triumph.

His heart swelled.

'Aye, glory to Vulkan.'

Numeon was pulling the blade of his halberd from the skull of a dying stegosaur. 'We should pursue them, my lord. Varrun and I can ensure they do not return,' he promised with a feral look. He'd removed his battle-helm and allowed the heat of the jungle to prick at his bare, ebon skin.

Vulkan held up his hand without meeting his champion's eye. 'No. We'll make our landing zone here and consolidate. I want to speak to Ferrus and Mortarion first. If this campaign is going to succeed, and there still be a planet left to bring back to the Imperium, we must work together. The earth here is rich and will yield much for the Crusade, but only if it isn't tainted by the war to bring One-Five-Four Four to compliance.'

It was a cold, methodical way of differentiating a world. It meant it was the fourth world to be brought to compliance by the 154th Expeditionary Fleet.

'I do not think they see it that way.'

They were standing apart from the rest, with only the mute Varrun within earshot. Around them, the battlefield rang with cold, sporadic barks of bolter fire as xenos survivors were executed. More distantly, the Army units were being recalled by discipline-masters and an impromptu audit taken of their numbers.

Now Vulkan met Numeon's gaze. 'Speak your mind.'

'The Fourteenth treat us with contempt and the Tenth as minor legionaries. I see no coalition between them and the Salamanders, at least not one that comes easily.'

'We cannot isolate ourselves, Numeon. Mortarion is simply proud. In us he sees a force as implacable as his own Death Guard, that is all. Ferrus is a friend to this Legion and to me, but… well, let us just say my brother has always had a zealous streak. It sometimes clouds his mind to anything but the creed of the Iron Hands.'

'*Flesh is weak*.' Numeon's lip curled as he repeated the doctrine of the X Legion. 'They mean us. *We* are weak.' The champion's demeanour suggested he wanted to prove otherwise but the Iron Hands were far from a reckoning, off towards the eastern peninsula of One-Five-Four Four's primary desert continent.

Vulkan interrupted. 'They mean anyone who is not of the Tenth. It is just pride. Are you not proud of your Legion?'

Numeon saluted sharply across his breastplate. For a Salamander, he carried the rigidity of one of Guilliman's own sons quite convincingly. 'I am fireborn, my liege.'

Smiling, Vulkan raised his hands to show he'd meant no disrespect to the veteran.

'You have been in my Pyre Guard since the beginning, Numeon. You and your brothers met me on Prometheus. Do you remember?'

Now the dutiful warrior bowed. 'It is forever ingrained in my memory, lord. It was the greatest moment of the Legion to be reunited with our father.'

'Aye, as it was for me. You of all the Firedrakes are pre-eminent, my first-captain, my equerry. Do not take the words of the Tenth to heart, brother. In truth, they only desire to prove their loyalty and worth to their father, as we all do. Despite his gruff exterior, Ferrus has a great respect for his fellow legionaries, especially the Eighteenth. You burn with the passion and fury of the Salamanders.' Vulkan returned a feral grin, evident in the tone of his

voice. ‘What is the coldness of a Medusan mind compared to that, eh?’ He clapped his hand on Numeon’s shoulder but the primarch’s bonhomie was fleeting. ‘Earth, fire and metal – we of the Eighteenth are forged strong. Never forget that.’

‘Your wisdom humbles me but I have never understood your temperance and compassion, my lord,’ Numeon confessed.

Vulkan frowned, as if about to impart some hidden truth he had always harboured, then his expression changed and hardened. He broke eye contact.

Numeon was about to question again when Vulkan raised his hand for silence. The primarch’s gaze was penetrating as he looked into the trees around them. Though Numeon could not discern what had suddenly got his father’s attention, he knew Vulkan’s sight was keener than any of his siblings. The tension in Vulkan’s posture transferred to his Pyre Guard, which quickly ebbed when he relaxed again.

He gestured seemingly at the air. ‘Show yourselves. Have no fear, no harm will befall you.’

Numeon cocked his head in confusion. His red eyes flared at the first of the humans emerging from the forest. He brandished his halberd in front of his primarch protectively. It was odd that he hadn’t detected them.

‘Be at ease, brother,’ Vulkan counselled, approaching the terrified jungle dwellers. They had come from hidden places deep within the trees, stepping out from shadowed boles or lofty nests. Some appeared from the earth itself, emerging from subterranean refuges. Tribal tattoos marked their faces and their bodies were swathed in apparel made from fire-baked bark and the stitching together of leaves. Though they had the aspect of beasts, they were definitely human. And only now the battle was over did they choose to show themselves.

Vulkan took off his helmet, a snarling drake’s head with an immense flame-like crest. Honour scars described a long legacy of heroic deeds upon a face the colour of onyx, which also possessed a softness belied by the primarch’s fearsome appearance. ‘See?’ he said to a boy-child brave enough to stand his ground. ‘We are not monsters.’

Confronted by the giant, diabolic primarch, the boy’s terrified expression suggested he thought otherwise.

Behind him, the other humans of his tribe cowered.

Though he kneeled, Vulkan was much taller than the child. The primarch stowed his forge hammer on his back and came to the boy with open palms

to show he wasn’t holding a weapon. Around him, the rest of the Pyre Guard had gathered. Numeon had summoned the others with Promethean battle-cant, known only to the Firedrakes, and they all watched apprehensively.

Sworn to protect the primarch, they were warriors apart. Terran-born, they did not always fully appreciate the earthy sentiments of the Nocturnean culture in which Vulkan was raised, but they knew their duty and felt it in their gene-enhanced blood.

Emboldened by the curious boy, more human refugees started to appear from out of the jungle. Hundreds joined the few score that had come initially. After a brief, stunned silence, they were wailing and moaning piteously. Their words were hard to make out but one kept being repeated over and over. *Ibsen*.

So this place had a name after all.

Vulkan stood up to survey them and the liberated humans backed off instantly.

‘What should we do with them, my lord?’ asked Numeon.

Vulkan regarded them a moment longer. There were many hundreds now. Some of the Army units had already begun trying to corral them, while remembrancers swarmed throughout the landing zone, documenting and interviewing now that the area was deemed safe.

A woman, perhaps the brave boy-child’s mother, approached Numeon and began babbling and crying. The native’s language was some bastardised blend of eldar-speech and proto-human word forms. Nearby xeno-linguists within the invasion force were struggling to discern meaning but made assumptions that, while distressed, the people were pleased to have been freed from the yoke of the aliens.

She scratched at the Pyre Guard’s battleplate and he looked as if he was about to forcibly remove her when a glance from his primarch stayed Numeon’s hand.

‘It is only fear. We have seen it before.’ Vulkan gently pulled the hysterical woman away from his equerry. Touched by the primarch’s aura, she calmed enough for an Army trooper to take her away. A little farther away, a picter flashed as one of the remembrancers recorded the moment for posterity. ‘You.’

The man quailed as Vulkan addressed him. ‘M-my lord?’

‘What is your name?’

‘Glaivarzel, sire. Imagist.’

Vulkan nodded. ‘You will surrender your picter to the nearest discipline-master.’

‘S-sire?’

‘No one must see that we are saviours, Glaivarzel. The Emperor needs us to be warriors, to be death incarnate. To be anything less would endanger the Crusade and my Legion. Do you understand?’

The remembrancer nodded slowly and gave his picter to one of the Phaerian discipline-masters who had overheard the exchange.

‘When this war is done, you have my sanction to come and speak with me. I will tell of my life and the coming of the father. Will that be sufficient recompense for the loss of your images?’

Glaivarzel nodded then bowed. He seemed to have abruptly lost the ability to speak. When he’d been ushered away, Vulkan turned back to Numeon.

‘*I* have seen fear,’ he told him. ‘On Nocturne, when the earth split and the sky cried tears of fire. That was real fear.’ He swept his gaze across the tribespeople as they were slowly moved away. ‘I should see suffering.’ His face became hard and unyielding. ‘But how can I feel compassion for a race whose hardships do not nearly compare to those endured by my own people?’

Nonplussed, and for want of something better to say, Numeon replied, ‘I am not from Nocturne.’

Vulkan turned from the disappearing refugees. A sigh escaped his lips in what might have been an expression of regret. ‘I know… So show me then, Numeon, how are we to liberate this world and ensure its compliance despite the feelings of our brother Legions?’

A gruff and belligerent voice provided narration to a sweeping hololithic image of a desert continent. Clutches of hard grassland and spiked vegetation were scattered across the sparse landscape. Overhead, the glare of a forbidding sun bleached the sand white. Monuments and domes made of baked brick rose up out of the dunes. A cluster of these structures encircled a massive menhir sunk into a natural depression. Here, the sweeping image stopped and magnified. Runes described the outer surface of the menhir, which was smooth and alien in design. Faintly glowing crystals, akin to giant oval rubies, were set at precise intervals and interlinked by swirling knot lines emanating from, and interwoven within, the core runes.

‘The aliens draw their psychic power from these nodes.’

The image blinked out and a hololith of the tenth primarch replaced it.

Ferrus Manus was a metal giant clad in jet-black power armour. His homeworld of Medusa was an icy wasteland echoed in the chilling silver of his pupil-less eyes and the glacial coldness of his knife-scraped flesh. Vulkan's brother went unhooded, displaying – defiantly – a battle-worn face framed by black hair that was closely-cropped to his scalp. Ferrus was a furnace constantly stoked; his anger was quick to rise and slow to abate. He was also called 'the Gorgon', allegedly on account of his steely glare that could petrify those it fell upon. A less fanciful explanation arose from his planet's namesake and a tie to a Terran legend of ancient Mykenaea.

'Our augurs have detected three such nodes in existence across the surface of One-Five-Four Four on the desert, ice plain and jungle continents–'

A low and hollow voice interrupted. 'Our mission is known to us, brother. We have no need of reiteration.'

A second primarch entered the war council and stood alongside Ferrus Manus, although the two were many leagues apart at opposite ends of the planet. It was a strange juxtaposition, one wrapped by arctic blizzards, the other bathed in the glow of a fiery sun. Mortarion of the Death Guard was tall and thin but his presence, even via hololith, was undeniable.

'What I want to know is why we three are here to take this world, three Legions attached to the same expeditionary fleet – what makes it worthy of my attention?'

The self-proclaimed Death Lord had a grim aspect. His gaunt, almost skeletal features were reminiscent of a mythic figure recalled from archaic lore. He was the reaper of souls, the harvester of the dead, the thing that all men dread as it comes to claim them in the night hours, shrouded by a funereal cloak as grey and ephemeral as life's final breath. Mortarion was all of these things and more. While the Night Lords employed fear as a weapon, he *was* fear incarnate.

Ashen, glabrous skin was suggested behind the grille that masked the lower half of his face. A cloud of vaporous gas encircled his head in a pallid miasma, the captured fumes of lethal Barbarus, and was exuded from the confines of his stark war panoply. Shining brass and naked steel clad his form. Much of the detail was obscured by the flowing grey cloak that pooled voluminously over Mortarion's angular shoulders like smoke, but a pitiless skull was still visible upon the breastplate. Poison censers ringed his towering form like a bandolier of grenades. Like his armour, these too carried the caustic air of the primarch's homeworld.

Vulkan stooped to grasp a fistful of earth. Brandishing it to the other primarchs, he allowed the soft loamy soil to drain through his gauntleted fingers.

‘Earth,’ he uttered simply. ‘There is a seam of valuable ore, gemstones too numerous to count beneath its surface. I taste it in the air and feel it under my feet. If we force compliance of One-Five-Four Four quickly, we can preserve it. A protracted war would see any potential geological bounty significantly reduced. That is why, brother.’

Ferrus spoke up, the irritation in his voice obvious, ‘And it is why the nodes must be tackled simultaneously and upon my order.’

A tired sigh rasped from the Death Lord’s lips. ‘This posturing wastes valuable time. The Fourteenth must cover more ground than their fellow Legions.’ Mortarion unclasped his mouth grille to grin at the Gorgon. It was at once a mirthless and forbidding gesture, not unlike the rictus mouth of a skull. ‘And besides, Vulkan and I know who is in command. There is no need to feel threatened, Ferrus.’

Fraternal rivalry existed between all the primarchs. It was a natural consequence of their shared genetic origins, but the Iron Hand and the Death Guard felt it more keenly than most. Each prided himself on his Legion’s endurance but while one looked to steel and machinery to overcome weakness, the other valued a more innate and biological resilience. As of yet, the virtues of both remained untested against one another.

Ferrus folded his arms, silver like flowing mercury, but did not bite at the obvious lure. ‘Is your task over-difficult, brother? I had thought the natives of Barbarus to be of sterner stock.’

Mortarion’s eyes narrowed and his grip on his massive scythe tightened. ‘The Legion leaves death in its wake, brother! Come to the ice fields and see for yourself how war should be conducted.’

Unable to cool his molten core any longer, Ferrus snapped. ‘Your ravages are already known to me, Mortarion. We must leave some of this world intact if it is to be of use afterwards. You and your kind may thrive in a toxic waste, but the settlers who follow us will not.’

‘*My* kind? Your own Legion’s progress is as slow and flawed as the machines they covet. What of the desert, is it won?’

‘It is intact. Any warmonger with Legiones Astartes at his call can unleash destruction, but your tactics are extreme. One-Five-Four Four will not become a barren, lifeless rock under my charge.’

‘Brothers…’

Both turned in mid-dispute to regard Vulkan.

‘Our enemy is without, not within. We should reserve our anger for them and them alone. We each occupy three very different theatres of war. Different approaches are needed and each of us must be the judge of that. Our father made us generals, and generals must be allowed to lead.’

Mortarion smiled thinly.

‘Temperate as ever, brother.’

Vulkan chose to take that as a compliment.

‘But Ferrus is also right. We are here to liberate and make this world compliant, not turn it to ash. One hell-planet lives in my nightmares – I have no desire to add another to it. Lighten your hand, Mortarion. The scythe does not need to fall so harshly.’ He turned to Ferrus Manus. ‘And you, brother, trust in us just as our father did when he charged us with bringing humanity back from the darkness of Old Night.’

Ferrus glared, slow to concede the point, but then nodded. The embers of his anger still burned. Where Vulkan was as the earth, solid and grounded; the Gorgon was volatile like an arctic volcano on the constant verge of eruption. He calmed reluctantly.

‘You have a lyrical soul, Vulkan. I wonder if it should not be a little harder.’

They were of a similar cast, the Iron Hand and the Salamander. Both were forgesmiths, but where Vulkan valued beauty and form, Ferrus Manus was chiefly concerned with function. It was a subtle but telling difference and one that left them a little divided at times, despite their close friendship.

‘Other than enlightenment, what else have you found in the jungle?’ asked the Gorgon.

Vulkan gave his report. ‘My Legion has encountered the eldar. Few in number, they employ ambush tactics and have slaved saurian creatures to their will. There are also witches amongst them. Our Army cohorts have been diminished and my sons have taken minor casualties but we are closing on the node.’

Giving only the slightest indication of displeasure at the news of legionary deaths, Ferrus added, ‘We too have fought creatures on the dunes, chitinous sand-burrowers and giant hela-lizards. The eldar ride them as we would ride a jetbike or speeder.’

Offering his own account, Mortarion said, ‘I severed the neck of an ice-serpent abroad on the tundra, and there are shag-hided mastodons bent to the aliens’ service.’

Vulkan asked, ‘Do you think the beasts are all native to the planet or did some arrive with the xenos?’

‘It hardly matters,’ said Mortarion. ‘They may have been created through the means of some aberrant alien technology.’ His amber eyes glared. ‘All I need to know is where they are.’

The primarch of the Iron Hands considered all of this as he tried to build an accurate picture of the war zone. ‘These eldar are not as technologically advanced as some I have fought.’ He scowled. ‘It makes me wonder how the indigenous population was so easily enslaved.’

‘We found some humans living within the jungle continent,’ said Vulkan. ‘A few thousand so far, but I believe there are more. I did not see warriors in their tribes. I suspect they are a simple people in need of our protection.’

‘Regardless, it is the eldar we must concern ourselves with.’ Mortarion’s tone became dismissive. ‘There are natives on the ice plains too, but my attention is fixed elsewhere.’

Contempt for the weakness of the humans exuded from the Death Lord’s every pore. Vulkan felt ashamed that his own feelings towards the jungle dwellers were not so dissimilar.

‘For once, I am in agreement with my brother,’ said Ferrus. He turned to Vulkan. ‘This world has been infiltrated utterly. No corner of it, however remote, is clean of the aliens’ taint. Until that is no longer the case, we cannot afford to have our purpose divided. Be mindful, brother, but let the humans look to their own protection. That is all.’

The hololith faded, indicating that was the end to their conversation. Vulkan bowed his head to Ferrus’s order and found himself inside an Army command tent with Numeon waiting patiently at the threshold.

‘What news?’ Vulkan’s mood was sour.

The equerry saluted with all the starched formality he was known for and took three steps into the tent. ‘Advance Army scouts have found the node, my lord. They are transmitting coordinates as we speak.’

Vulkan was already walking from the tent and into the open. Phaerian troopers at guard outside hurried out of the primarch’s path. ‘Ready the Legion. We march at once.’

Numeon followed in lockstep. ‘Shall I summon the Stormbirds?’

‘No. We go on foot.’

Outside, some of the Army cohorts were building pyres stacked with the alien dead. Curiously, small groups of natives ringed the edges of the vast fires, sobbing into one another’s arms. They had lost everything, their lives and their homes, and were caught up in a war they didn’t understand.

Numeon had said he was compassionate. All Vulkan felt was alone. Even amongst his brothers he felt isolated, save for Horus. A close kinship existed between them. There was something very noble and selfless about the Warmaster. He fostered loyalty in those around him like no other. Charisma bled off him in an almost palpable aura. Perhaps that was why the Emperor had chosen him and not Sanguinius to be Warmaster. Vulkan saw him as an older sibling, one whom he looked up to and could confide in. He wished dearly that he could speak with him now. Vulkan felt his humours out of balance and he longed for Nocturne again. Perhaps the long war had changed him. His expression hardened.

‘We will burn the eldar out.’

As he watched the twisting smoke tendrils rise into the sky, Vulkan was taken back to a time before he knew of stars and planets, and of the warriors in thunder armour who were destined to become his sons.

Strong hands worked the fuller, drawing out the glowing orange metal and shaping it to the blacksmiter’s will. There were calluses on those hands, testimony to the long hours spent toiling before the flame. Rough fingers gripped the hammer’s worn haft as it rose and fell, beating the fire-scaled iron until it made a taper. The blacksmiter added a second taper to the first and the metal became a point.

‘Pass me the tongs…’

As tough as cured leather, the blacksmiter held out a bare hand. Beneath the soot, it had a healthy tan from time spent tracking the Arridian plain for gemstones. He took the proffered tool and clamped it around the spear-point. Steam erupted in a hissing cloud as the hot metal touched the surface of the water in the drum. It reminded the son of Mount Deathfire, snoring loudly in her sleep and choking the sky with her smoky breath.

‘She is the heart blood,’ his father had told him once. He remembered he was barely a year old and already taller and stronger than most of the men in the town. Standing upon the mountain’s flanks, they had watched her vent and spew her wrath. At first the boy had wanted to flee, not out of fear for himself – his will was as iron in that regard – but because he was scared for

his father. N'bel had quietened the boy with a gesture. Holding his palm flat against his chest, he bade his son do the same. 'Respect the fire. Respect her. She is life and death, my boy,' he had said to him. 'Our salvation and our doom.'

Our salvation and our doom…

Such was the way of things on Nocturne.

In the old tongue it meant 'darkness' or 'night', and it was every inch the benighted world, but it was the only home he had ever known.

After a few moments, the billowing steam from the sundered metal ebbed and N'bel lifted it out of the water drum and presented it to his son.

It was still incredibly hot, the glow of the forge not yet faded.

'See? A new tip for your spear.' He smiled and the old smiter's face creased like leather. There was a rime of soot around his soft eyes and his thinning cheeks were powdered with ash. His scalp was shaved and there were branding scars on the bald pate. 'You'll kill plenty of sauroch on the Arridian plain with it.'

The son returned the old man's smile. 'I could have done it myself, father.'

N'bel was cleaning his tools, smacking off the fire-scale and brushing away the soot. It was dark in the forge, all the better to see the temperature of the metal and gauge its readiness. The air was thick with the scent of burning and thickened by the heat. Far from oppressive, the son found the conditions invigorating. He liked it here. He felt safe, a measure of solace he couldn't emulate anywhere else on Nocturne. His father's tools hung in racks upon the walls, only hinted at in the gloom, and lay upon benches and anvils of all sizes and shapes. The son had strong hands, and here in the forge and workshop was where he could put them to best use.

N'bel kept his eyes on his work and didn't notice the son's brief reverie. 'I am a humble blacksmiter. I don't possess the skills of the metal-shapers, nor do I have the wisdom of an earth shaman, but I am still your father and a father likes to do things for a beloved son.'

The son frowned and approached the old man tentatively. 'What's wrong?'

N'bel kept cleaning the tools for a short while longer before his arms sagged to his sides and he sighed. He set the hammer down atop the anvil and looked his son in the eye.

'I know what you have come here to ask me, lad.'

'I…'

'You don't need to deny it.'

The pain at his father's discomfort was etched on the son's face. 'I'm not trying to hurt you, father.'

'I know that, but you deserve the truth. I am just afraid of what it will mean when you have it.'

The son held N'bel's shoulder and cupped the older man's chin. It was like a child's in his immense hand and he towered over the blacksmiter.

'You raised me and gave me a home. You will always be my father.'

Tears welled in N'bel's eye and he wiped them away as he broke from his son's embrace.

'Follow me,' he said, and they walked to the back of the stone forge. For as long as the son could remember, there had been an old anvil sat in the gloom there. It was shrouded in a leather tarp that N'bel ripped away and cast to the floor. Rust colonised the surface of the massive anvil and it shocked the son to see such disrepair. N'bel barely noticed as he braced his shoulder against the ruddy metal side. He strained and the anvil scraped forwards a fraction. 'I didn't raise a giant of a son just so I could still do all of my own heavy lifting,' he said wryly. 'A little help for your old man?'

Ashamed he'd just been looking on, the son joined him at once and together they moved the great anvil aside. He barely felt the weight: the strength in his arms was incredible and extended to every muscle and sinew in his body, but the simple act of working together with his father was soul-enriching.

N'bel was sweating when it was done and wiped a hand across his brow. 'I'm sure I used to be stronger,' he gasped. The levity was short-lived as he pointed to a square recess sunken into the floor. 'There…' It was thick with soot and dust, but the son realised at once that it was some kind of trap-door.

'Has this been here all the time?'

'I bless the day you came to us,' said N'bel. 'You were, and still are, a miracle.'

The son looked at his father but he gave nothing away. He knelt down and felt around the edges of the square depression in the floor. His fingers found purchase and in a feat of strength that no other man in the township could have managed, the son lifted the great stone slab into the air. Despite its weight, he set it down carefully and then stared into the dark passageway it revealed retreating back into the earth.

'What's down there?'

‘Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve never shown fear. Not even the drakes below the mountain gave you pause.’

‘I fear this,’ he admitted openly. ‘Now I’m faced with it, I’m not sure I want the truth.’

N’bel placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. ‘You will always be my son… always.’

He took his first steps into the darkness and found a stone stairway underfoot that clacked loudly with his every footfall. As the son went deeper, the edge of something hard and metallic began to resolve out of the blackness.

‘I see something…’

‘Do not fear it, lad.’

‘I see…’

Echoing through the walls of the forge, a low reverberant bellow stopped the son’s next faltering step. It was a warning. Up in one of the town’s watchtowers, a horn was being blown. Even deep within the forge, N’bel and his son heard it.

Relief swept through the son as he abandoned the darkened hollow and returned to the forge’s gloomy light above.

‘Truth will have to wait,’ he said.

N’bel was scowling, reaching for his spear, his favoured hammer already tucked into his tool belt. ‘Dusk-wraiths.’

Every tribe on Nocturne had its legends about them. They were the night-fiends, the stealers of flesh, the dark spectres, a waking nightmare brought to life when the skies became as crimson and the clouds boiled overhead. Few who’d seen them had lived, and even those rare individuals were forever broken by the experience. Horror stories given form, they were alien slavers who stole people from their homes and carried them away on their ships into the endless dark. None who entered that place ever returned.

The son snarled. ‘Are we to be forever hunted?’

‘It is the anvil, that is all,’ said N’bel. ‘Endure it, be tempered by it and become stronger.’

‘I am already strong, father.’

N’bel gripped his son’s shoulder. ‘You are, Vulkan. Stronger than you know.’

Together, they ran from the forge and out into the town.

A sanguine sky reigned over Hesiod and rust-rimed clouds billowed and crashed in the bloody heavens. Ash and smoke laced the breeze and a pregnant heat lay heavy on the air like a mantle of invisible chain.

‘Hell-dawn, when the ash banks break and the sun burns,’ cried N’bel, pointing to the sky. ‘It heralds the blood. Every time at this inauspicious hour they come.’

In the town square there was a panic. The people hurried from their homes, clutching what meagre belongings they could to their chests, clinging to their loved ones. Some were screaming, afraid of what they knew was coming and terrified that this time they would be dragged into the endless dark.

Breughar, the metal-shaper, had emerged out of the throng and was trying to restore calm. He and several of the other men were shouting for the rest of the people to take refuge. The horn bayed on, driving the fearful to an ever greater frenzy.

‘This madness must end,’ breathed Vulkan, appalled at the terror now seizing his tribe. These were a strong people who endured the ravages of the earth when the ground split and the volcanoes cast fire and darkness into the sky. But the dusk-wraiths, the fear they evoked was beyond reason.

As his father went to help Breughar and the others, Vulkan ran across the square to a vast pillar of rock. It was the burning stone, where the earth-shaman went to meditate when the sun was at its zenith. It was unoccupied at that moment and Vulkan scaled the sides of the monolithic stone without slowing to reach the peak in seconds. Crouching on the flat plateau, he had a good view of the lands beyond Hesiod.

Dark, orange-flecked smudges marred the horizon line where distant villages blazed. Oily smoke cascaded into the sky from where they’d been put to the torch and their inhabitants burned alive. Nomadic sauroch drovers fled as their herds were butchered. Dactylid carrion-eaters turned lazy circles, black against the blood-red sky, waiting for any morsels the dusk-wraiths might leave them.

The drovers were oblivious to the creatures. They were running for Hesiod’s walls but Vulkan realised grimly that they’d never make it.

Behind them the dusk-wraiths taunted and shrieked. Their bladed skiffs hovered above the plain, jagged silhouettes against the red of Hell-dawn. Though he was too far away to hear it, Vulkan saw one of the drovers cry out as he was pinioned by barbed nets before a half-naked warrior-witch

impaled him on her spear. Others, tall, lithe creatures wearing segmented armour the colour of night, cast javelins from the backs of their machines as they revelled in the hunt.

When they were finished with the nomads and the villages, they would come to Hesiod.

Vulkan clenched his fists. Every Hell-dawn was the same. When the sky was shot red with blood, the shrieking would begin and the dusk-wraiths would come. No man should be hunted, not like that. No son or daughter of Nocturne should be made to suffer as the drovers would. Life was hard enough. Survival was hard enough.

'No more.'

Vulkan had seen what he needed to.

He leapt off the rock, landing in a crouch. N'bel ran to him, breathless with his efforts of rushing the weak and the vulnerable to safety.

'Come on. We must hide too.'

Vulkan's face was stern as he rose to his feet and looked down on his father. 'While we hide, others suffer.'

N'bel gasped a reply. 'What choice do we have? We stay and we all die.'

'We can always fight.'

'What?' N'bel was nonplussed. 'Against the dusk-wraiths?' He shook his head. 'No, son, we would be butchered like those herds out on the plain. Come!' He seized Vulkan's arm but was shrugged off.

'I will fight.'

All around them, the people of Hesiod were disappearing into secret alcoves and subterranean caves below the town. It would be the same across all of Nocturne. At Themis, Heliosa, Aethonian and the rest – the seven chief settlements of the planet would flee to their hollows in the earth and close their eyes to the nightmare. There they would stay while the dusk-wraiths ransacked and slaughtered, destroying everything they had fought and died to create.

'No. I'm pleading with you now. Hide like the rest of us.'

Vulkan walked away, headed for the forge.

N'bel called after him, 'Where are you going? Vulkan!'

He went inside the forge without answering. When he emerged he had two stout smiting hammers slung over either shoulder.

'The blood of these people may not flow in my veins but I am still one of them, I am still of Nocturne. And I will see it tortured no more.'

Faced with the fury of his son's righteous anger, N'bel's despair turned to resolution. He hefted his spear.

'Then I won't let you stand alone.'

To object or deny him would be to insult his father and Vulkan was not about to do that. Instead, he nodded and an unspoken understanding passed between them. Though they might not share the same blood, they would always be kin. Whatever waited below the trap-door in the forge, it would not change that.

Together they walked to the middle of the square and stood facing Hesiod's gates.

Beyond, the shrieking of the dusk-wraiths grew louder.

'I have never been prouder of you than I am right now, Vulkan.'

'When this is over, I want you to seal the trap-door shut. I never want to know what is down there.'

'I do not think we will get the chance, son,' N'bel turned to him, 'but if we live through this, what about your origins? Don't you want to know where you came from?'

Vulkan glanced down at the cracked, volcanic earth. 'These are my origins. This is where I was born. It is all I need to know, father.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Vulkan saw Breughar. He carried his two-handed hammer across his brawny chest and the torcs knotted in his thick beard clanked as he moved. Until Vulkan had arrived in Hesiod, Breughar had been the largest and strongest man of the town. He'd accepted the change in status with a grace and nobility that Vulkan had never forgotten. The metal-shaper nodded to N'bel as he took up his place alongside them.

'You are the best of us,' he said to Vulkan. 'I will set my shoulder to yours, kinsman.'

Breughar was not alone. Others were coming from their hiding places to stand in the square too.

'My shoulder to yours,' said Gorve, the plainskeeper.

'And mine,' added Rek'tar, hornmaster.

Soon there were over a hundred Nocturneans, men and women both, clutching spears, swords, their forge hammers and anything else that could be used as a weapon. They were a people united, and Vulkan was their foundation rock.

'We hide no more,' said Vulkan, and drew his hammers across his body. His gaze narrowed to a point fixed upon the gate. Like a blade held against

the forge flame, he fashioned his anger into a weapon he could wield. Too long had they been prey. Now they would rise…

Like a voice cut off abruptly at the source, the shrieking ceased.

Silence persisted for a moment, haunted by the distant mewling of mauled sauroch cattle or the pleas of dying drovers fallen just short of sanctuary.

It wasn't long before their tormentors appeared.

Clad in shadows, they moved with a perverted grace, scaling Hesiod's border like slivers of night. Drenched in almost palpable cruelty, the dusk-wraiths crouched on the summit of the wall, cackling to one another, baring their teeth and flashing the silver of their savage blades in torturous promise. Leather-clad witches, their long hair festooned with razor edges, carrying serrated spears, wicked falchions and other sharp instruments Vulkan could only guess at the purpose of, were the first to cross the threshold.

With feline surety they landed on all fours, rolling up on two legs in a sinuous swaggering motion that suggested their incredible arrogance and sense of superiority. Their eyes were alive with lustful anticipation of the kill, and just the smallest mote of amusement at the defiance of the human cattle in front of them.

Their slow advance into the square was intended to make their prey quail. Beside him, Vulkan could feel the other warriors' tension. He also saw the pack mentality in the dusk-wraiths' formation. It put him in mind of the leonid, the alpha-hunters that stalked the Arridian plain. These creatures, these pale-skinned, androgynous things, possessed none of the majesty of those great maned beasts.

Vulkan's lips curled into a sneer, 'Soul-shrived ghost-walkers; that is all you are.'

He stepped forwards.

'Return,' he bellowed. 'Return to your ships and be gone. You will only find steel and death waiting for you here, and no longer cattle for your culling knives.'

One of the witches laughed. It was a chilling, evil sound. She said something to one of her kin in the barbed dialect of the dusk-wraiths and a lesser male snarled obediently. His eyes were tarry pits that narrowed as they settled on Vulkan. With a shrilling cry, he raced at the Nocturnean who had dared to defy the slavers. He was fast, like a lightning-adder.

Vulkan told the others, ‘Stay back,’ and rushed to meet the dusk-wraith. The creature held his jagged knives behind him, leading with the angular point of his jutting chin. He wore no battle-helm or mask, but a serpent tattoo was painted on the left side of his face.

The distance between the combatants closed in moments, and just before the clash the dusk-wraith shifted his line of attack and blurred around Vulkan’s flank, intending to gut him from his blind side. But Vulkan had seen the feint coming. Unclouded by fear, his battle instincts were honed to a monomolecular edge that the slaver could not possibly have accounted for.

He blocked the blow meant to cripple him with the haft of his hammer and brought the other one down on the witch’s skull. A stunned silence fell over the crowd, both Nocturnean and dusk-wraith, as Vulkan pulled his weapon from the gory smear he had left behind.

He spat on the corpse and glared at the female witch.

‘Not wraiths at all, just flesh and blood.’

The witch smiled, her interest and her ardour suddenly piqued. ‘Mon’keigh…’

She licked her lips, then blended back into the shadows. Before Vulkan could come after her, the gate to the town of Hesiod exploded in a storm of splinters and fire.

Vulkan was engulfed, reduced to a dark and hazy silhouette as the fire rolled over him. Shielding his eyes, he knew he would not die and stepped from the conflagration unharmed. That alone gave the dusk-wraiths aboard the skiff pause as it confronted him through the ragged gap in the wall.

Warriors, the ones in night-black armour, spilled around the edges of the skiff, eagerly brandishing hooks and blades. Vulkan snapped a dusk-wraith in half as it swung at him then crushed another with a blow from his fist.

Behind him, he heard his kinsmen attack as the people of Hesiod fought back against the slavers that had plagued them for centuries.

Vaulting over a horde of warriors, their blades cutting harmlessly through air, Vulkan landed in front of the skiff. Fingers like iron bolts dug into the lamellar nose of the machine as the Nocturnean turned it over. Screeching slavers fell from the tipped vessel before Vulkan tossed it aside like an unwanted spear. The battered skiff rolled over the ground before erupting in a ball of fiery shrapnel.

Two more came in its wake, the first harbouring a cohort of warriors. At the orders of its driver, the skiff accelerated to ramming speed, intending to

impale Vulkan on the spiked prow. Timing his jump to perfection, he leapt onto the floating barge at full pelt and raced up the vehicle's plated snout like it was the shallow flank of a mountain crag.

The warriors came at him, spitting hell-shards from their rifles or lunging with jagged blades. Vulkan smashed their attacks aside and was amongst them, hewing with his hammers.

Hatred fuelled his every swing, together with a determination that the cycle of torture and fear would end here at this very dawn. He tore loose the command throne of the skiff's driver, the warriors a broken mess behind him, and threw it at the third vehicle.

An energy blossom flashed as the improvised missile struck a protective field surrounding the last skiff, but Vulkan hadn't slowed and was charging through it. Skin burned as he punctured the energy shield, he landed on the deck of the vehicle and faced off against a cadre of warriors. They looked brawnier than the others and toted bladed glaives that crackled with unnatural power. Each wore a faceplate as white as alabaster in stark contrast to the visceral red of their ornate armour. The ghosts glared at the interloper imperiously. Behind them, the slaver-lord looked through the jagged eye-slits of his horned helm. A rasped utterance from his fanged mouth grille unleashed his warriors.

One of the ghosts advanced silently and swung his glaive, but Vulkan dipped from the blow, which left a blazing trail in the air behind it. A second glaive jabbed at him and this time Vulkan swatted it down into the skiff's deck plating, but was left with a smoking haft in his hand. Another blow reduced his other hammer to ash as he was forced to parry again.

Rising from his seat, the slaver-lord snarled his displeasure at the Nocturnean's continued existence.

With their enemy disarmed, the ghosts' arrogance overflowed and they prepared to finish him.

Vulkan growled with contempt. 'I need no weapons to kill the likes of you.'

In a devastating display of speed and brutality, he took the bodyguards apart. Impaled and beheaded by their very own blades, Vulkan threw their shattered remains over the side of the skiff and into the melee below.

Levelling a finger at the slaver-lord, he promised, 'This terror ends with your life.'

The dusk-wraith pulled a glittering sword from the scabbard nestled next to his throne. A dark mist coiled from the blade and pricked at Vulkan's nose.

A hollow, hacking sound escaped from the slaver-lord's lips. It resonated through the mouth of his monstrous fright mask. It was laughter.

Vulkan then noticed a needle-like gauntlet on the dusk-wraith's other hand. He pointed it at the Nocturnean in mocking symmetry of the threat he'd just received.

'Paaaiin…' he hissed.

Even with superhuman speed, Vulkan couldn't reach the slaver-lord before he unleashed the gauntlet weapon.

'Son!'

N'bel's voice rang out above the clash around him. Instinct told Vulkan to reach out with his open hand. A subtle change in the breeze suggested something moving through it. His senses alive to everything, Vulkan's fingers closed around the worn haft of a smiting hammer and plucked it blindly from the air. It left his grip a split second later, spinning towards the slaver-lord then splitting his ugly mask before the thought had even entered his mind that he was doomed. His face cloven in two, the slaver-lord dropped his sword and toppled off the end of the skiff.

Vaulting down to the square, Vulkan set about the other dusk-wraiths without slowing. He was of the killing mind, a warrior spirit flaring within that both terrified and excited him. Seizing a passing dusk-wraith, he crushed its head to paste within its helm. Another, he broke apart upon his knee. A third, fourth, fifth… Vulkan battered them with his bare fists as all the terrors the slavers had committed against Nocturne over the centuries were repaid in violent and bloody retribution.

The battle was over swiftly.

Unprepared for such stern resistance, the remnants of the dusk-wraith raiding party withdrew before they were utterly destroyed. Frenzied with battle-lust, only the witches lingered. There was one amongst them who had a last knife to stab and twist before she was done.

She was at the opposite end of the square, dancing around the spears and swords of the Nocturneans, leaving decapitated bodies with every turn and pirouette. Vulkan's eyes became hate-filled slits when he found the laughing witch.

That anger turned into panic when he saw who rushed next into her killing arc.

'Father!'

Vulkan was much more than human. He possessed strength, speed and intelligence greater than any man, it was how he knew he was different to his kith and kin, but even he could not reach N'bel before those murderous knives.

Cursing his earlier wrathful abandon for losing the hammer with which he'd killed the slaver-lord, Vulkan clenched his empty fists. The only man he had known as father was about to be butchered while he looked on. Every step across the blood-soaked square felt like ten leagues as the witch's blade circled and flashed… carving… hypnotising… deadly.

Tears of fire blurred the Nocturnean's sight, the scene unfolding before him framed by a crimson haze. It would be forever scarred into his memory.

N'bel lifted his spear…

…the witch would cut him open and spill his guts…

Her eyes flashed and her gaze met Vulkan's across the carnage. Even in the act of murder, she exuded arrogance. He would remember those eyes, dagger-thin and filled with a sickening ennui. They would haunt him, though not in the way he thought…

N'bel was hopelessly outmatched. His spear thrust was already travelling wide even as the shimmering falchions sought out his vital organs… but the blows never fell. With a roar, Breughar threw himself in harm's way. To the metal-shaper's immense credit, he parried one of the blades and it carved a heavy wound along his forearm that drew a scream from the burly tribesman. With the second blade his fortune faded; it sank deep into his belly, ripping free with a terrible sluurch *of rent skin. Breughar's innards slopped onto the ground in a steaming pile of offal. For a moment he stood transfixed by the realisation of his own death, then he fell and was still. Blood pooled beneath the body, expanding in a ruddy mire that touched N'bel's feet. Dazed and prone from when the metal-shaper had thrown him aside, he could barely lift his arms to defend himself.*

Amused at the human's pointless heroism, the witch closed on N'bel but Breughar's sacrifice had bought Vulkan the time he needed. Mountainous and filled with righteous anger, the Nocturnean was upon his enemy.

'Face me!'

She recoiled like a snake as Vulkan came at her, fists swinging. The witch was hard-pressed to avoid the blows and could fashion no riposte. She back-flipped and wove and twisted until there was enough distance between them

to taunt him and then flee. The rest of the witches were dead or dying. She alone escaped the massacre.

Outside the shattered walls of Hesiod, a tear opened in the fabric of reality. Endless darkness beckoned from inside the tear and the screams of the damned echoed in the breeze, promising hell and torment for all who entered. It swallowed the witch last of all before shuddering closed behind her, leaving only the scent of blood and the chill of near-death.

It was over.

Hell-dawn ended and the Nocturnean sun rose to its zenith.

N'bel met Vulkan at the gates. The blacksmiter was still shaking but he lived.

'Breughar is dead.'

An unnecessary fact. Vulkan had seen the man die.

'But you live, father, and for that I will be eternally grateful.'

His voice still trembled with an undercurrent of the rage that had consumed him during the fight. His chest heaved like a bellows, drenched in alien blood.

'We live, son.' He put his hand on Vulkan's arm and something about the feel of those old and calloused fingers calmed the Nocturnean, siphoning the tension away.

'Such hate. I felt it, father. It touched me as sure as I can feel your hand upon me now.'

He turned to face the old man, his eyes ablaze like balefires.

'I am a monster…'

N'bel didn't recoil, but held Vulkan's cheek.

'You are a true Promethean son.'

'But the fury…' He looked down. 'The way I killed them with my bare hands…' Before meeting his father's gaze again, he said, 'I am not a blacksmiter, am I?'

The people of the town were gathering. Despite all the death that muddied their streets, the mood was exultant. Vulkan was being hailed as a hero.

N'bel sighed and in it, all of his latent fears about losing his only son were borne away.

'You are not. You are from up there.'

Vulkan followed his father's outstretched hand to the hot sky above.

The sun burned down like a single glowering eye, wreathed in smoky cloud. Vulkan closed his eyes and allowed the heat to warm him, N'bel's

voice distant in his mind.

‘You came from the stars…’

The edifice resembled a stone menhir Vulkan had seen worshipped by debased and primitive cultures. Such backward religions were beyond compliance, and the Salamanders had burned entire worlds corrupted by graven beliefs. Here, on One-Five-Four Four, it represented a nexus of the enemy’s power, but would be torn down just the same. Something about its presence unsettled the Phaerians, who were lashed into obedience by the discipline-masters and driven on into the cracking guns of the eldar.

On the orders of the primarch, the Legion had burned the jungle all the way to the psychic node. Like wildlife facing a natural forest fire, the eldar and their beasts had fled before the blaze. Vulkan’s edict was absolute, his advance pitiless. Even when confronted by the human refugees caught between the hammer and anvil of the war, he didn’t relent. All he saw were pale echoes of the noble people of his own beloved world, the hardships of the jungle-dwellers as nothing compared to the harsh plight of Nocturne. In his darker moments, he wondered if he actually despised these sorry humans for allowing themselves to be conquered and wondered if his supposed compassion had evaporated. As the land burned and the sky choked with smoke, he acknowledged it was the presence of the aliens that had affected his mood. That and the remembrances of their ravages from his old life before the starships had come.

War was unmaking; it went against everything his old father had taught him in the forge. Vulkan valued craft, the sense of transition beforehand and permanence afterwards. It brought quietude to his troubled and lonely soul. His true father, he who had crafted Vulkan to be a general, needed a warrior, not a blacksmiter. A warrior was what Vulkan would be.

Standing on a vast ridge that jutted clear of the jungle expanse, Vulkan took consolation from the fact that with the destruction of the node, the need to linger on One-Five-Four Four would pass, and he could put thoughts of his homeworld behind him more easily.

Ibsen. That was its name. If it had a name and not a number, it had a heart. Did that also mean it was worth saving? Vulkan pushed the question aside as if it were a piece of clinker from the furnace.

Though he was surrounded by his Pyre Guard and the two Legion companies looking down on the unfolding battle, Vulkan was very much alone in his troubled mind.

Numeon spoke up, interrupting the primarch's thoughts. 'They breach the outer threshold of the aliens' domain. I expected a more concerted defence, I must admit.'

Several of the Pyre Guard muttered in agreement. Varrun nodded, the servo-grinding of his armour joints articulating his response.

There were other Salamanders captains nearby, and they too felt as the Pyre Guard did. Either the eldar were a spent force or they were holding out for another reason.

Pensively, Vulkan watched.

Unlike the ambush in the jungle, here the aliens were arrayed in number. Beneath their verdant cloaks that blended with the foliage around them, they carried fierce repeating bow-casters and long rifles. Vulkan watched as a discipline-master was shot through the eye and a reddish plume of brain matter vacated the back of his skull. Another quickly took his place and the Phaerians' heavy-handed push continued.

The eldar used heavy weapon batteries too, more manoeuvrable than those employed by the Army cohorts on account of their anti-gravity platforms. Stuttering las-beams and incandescent plasma bursts reduced the men rushing from the jungle fringes into a grimy red paste. Two-man Rapier turrets and tracked Tarantula guns replied with a harsh staccato of solid shells as the heavy weapons exchange continued.

The overseers and discipline-masters had formed the feral Phaerians into their Army cohorts. Thick blocks of muscular and tattooed men advanced in formation, scatter-locks and auto-carbines tearing up the gloom with their combined muzzle flare.

On the opposite side, crouched behind clumps of ruined alabaster, the eldar unleashed an equally fierce response and the air was stitched with further las-beams and solid shot. Bodies fell on both sides, spun by heavy impacts or simply dropped by kill-shots only to be crushed underfoot by the troops behind them, and the death rate increased as the firing lines closed.

A temple surrounded the menhir. It was an aberrant thing, engraved with alien sigils that mimicked the one Ferrus Manus had shown Vulkan via the hololith. The desert node was the only one the Imperium had managed to get a look at before their augurs were permanently disabled. But this one varied slightly. The runic elements on the flat sides of the menhir were in different configurations. It was language in some form. With time and proximity to

the sigils, a dedicated study would unlock its secrets. Vulkan harboured no such desires. He only wanted to destroy it.

He turned to Numeon.

‘When the Army cohorts are fully engaged and the bulk of the eldar drawn off, be ready to launch our assault on the node. If we attack decisively and quickly we can destroy it before too many lives are surrendered to the meatgrinder.’

Numeon’s voice was gravelly through his battle-helm. ‘You think the aliens will lose heart once we’ve brought down their obelisk?’

‘The only reason they’re here and not withdrawing to the forest where they can employ their preferred tactics is to defend it. That motivation ends with the destruction of the node. Our opportunity is close. We must just be patient.’

Vulkan’s eyes scanned the outer defences. The temple walls were ceremonial, not designed to withstand any form of concerted attack and certainly not one from the Emperor’s Angels of Death. He perceived rookeries in the upper towers, partially occluded where the jungle canopy had encroached upon them. Pterosaur-riders lurked there in arboreal nests, waiting for the Legiones Astartes to engage. Hidden in the penumbral dark of the forest, he also detected mounted raptor-beasts. The eldar were keeping their assault troops in reserve. He didn’t doubt that they would encounter more witch-psykers too. It was imperative that they neutralise the objective swiftly before the enemy could channel the node’s power.

The first ranks of the Army had gained the outer temple defences and were fighting hand-to-hand. Phaerians were brutish men who fought like savages against the eldar’s graceful lethality. Even so, the Army grunts had numbers, and skill was worth little pitched against such odds. An eldar wearing a mottled green cloak shot a man at close range, punching his heart muscle through his back and spine. Switching from his rifle, he drew a blade on another that flashed like quicksilver and released a crimson spray from the Phaerian’s throat. Three of his comrades ganged up on the alien, and he was borne down beneath the weighted butts of their auto-carbines. Others died equally grimly: stamped to mulch by Army-issue boots, beheaded by alien mono-wire, gutted on bayonets or slashed apart by falchions. Phaerians moved in packs, shoulder to shoulder; where the eldar roved as solitary killers, finding partners briefly before breaking apart again to seek fresh enemies. It was almost primitive in its brutality.

The bloody tableau unfolding on the battlefield washed over Vulkan. Overwhelming force was not drawing the eldar into a full attack as he'd hoped. But as he regarded the melee dispassionately, he did see the slightest thinning in the aliens' defences as they began to stretch.

'They are holding back until we are fully committed,' said Numeon, as if reading his primarch's thoughts. The equerry had just noticed the secreted saurian troops in the lofty arbours and foliage around the temple.

Vulkan's fiery gaze narrowed to ember-like slits. 'Then let's give them some encouragement. Release the Fifth and Fourteenth companies, the Fireborn.'

Heka'tan was not a prideful captain. The ambush in the jungle had cost the 14th more legionary blood than he was comfortable with, but he was pragmatic like all Salamanders and knew this was simply war. Losing Sergeant Bannon was a bitter blow – he had fought alongside Bannon for over a century – and the flamer division was virtually destroyed by the charge of the carnodons. It had been split and redistributed around the other squads. It seemed strange to have specialists scattered around the 14th but Heka'tan couldn't deny the tactical flexibility it offered.

His fellow captain of the Fifth, Gravius, had sustained losses in his company too. Like Heka'tan, he was humble and understood his place in the war. Even so, when the primarch's order came down from the ridge, Heka'tan clenched his fist in anticipation of some vengeance. He knew that Gravius would be doing the same.

Crouched at the edge of the battling Army cohorts, Heka'tan turned to Kaitar.

'The anvil calls us, brother. Lord Vulkan would see our wounded self-esteem restored in the tempering flame of the forge.'

Kaitar nodded as he racked the slide on his bolter. On his shoulder guard, he'd inscribed the names of Oranor and Attion in black ash.

'This shall be their requiem.'

'For all the absent dead,' Luminor added, crouched at the captain's opposite side, his white Apothecary's plate stained with Legion blood.

Heka'tan's command squad was gathered about him. All were humble, self-abnegating warriors, but like their captain they welcomed the opportunity to avenge the fallen.

'Into the fires of war,' Heka'tan promised, then raised Gravius on the comm-feed.

‘The 5th are readying as we speak,’ the other captain uttered. ‘I will take them into the enemy’s flank. We move on your order, brother-captain.’

‘Then consider it given, Gravius. Glory to Vulkan,’ Heka’tan replied.

Kaitar turned and roared to the others, signalling for the forward squads to march. ‘Glory to the primarch and the Legion!’

More than two hundred voices replied as one. ‘Fireborn!’

Flamers broken up amongst the divisions came forward in the ranks to lay down a curtain of fire before the advancing 14th. Heka’tan led them slowly at first, cutting down the eldar with methodical bolter bursts. He’d kept his big guns in reserve, and as the eldar drew off some of their forces to counter the threat, the captain gave the order for them to shoot.

Missile contrails clouded the air and thick conversion beams hummed powerfully as sergeants unleashed the might of their heavy divisions. To counter the barrage, the eldar released their pterosaurs and the winged reptilians dived towards the bigger guns at the back of Heka’tan’s formation. Heavy bolters struck up next and the air was filled with their blistering shells. Flung javelins fell in a piercing torrent but most were destroyed before they struck legionary bodies. Flying saurians were chewed apart by the fusillade, but more were descending from their rookeries.

The sergeants of the forward squads kept them moving, firing from the hip. A massive squadron of raptors appeared on the flank, their riders brandishing power lances and spitting curses at the Emperor’s warrior angels. Dreadnoughts lumbered forwards to intercept them. Attion had been alone when he fought and was killed by the carnodon, but now an entire unit of the armoured monsters was coming at the raptors.

‘Disrupt their flank attacks, venerable brothers, and break up the aerial sweeps from their flyers,’ Heka’tan’s voice rang down the feed.

‘*In Vulkan’s name!*’ they responded together as they clashed with the eldar riders.

The distance to the temple was closing. Heka’tan revved up his chainblade, whispering an oath. His command squad were locked in beside him. He opened the feed again. ‘Heavy divisions withdraw into the forest. Captain Gravius – we are about to engage.’

The reply came swift and eager. ‘We are the hammer, Captain Heka’tan. Become the anvil and let’s see them broken.’

‘It shall be done,’ Heka’tan promised. The hellish kaleidoscope of close combat was almost upon them, ‘Salamanders. Bring them down!’

From the summit of the ridge, Vulkan watched the Fifth and 14th companies attack. It prompted a flood of eldar to uncloak and join the battle. In a matter of moments, the defenders of the psychic node had swelled with foot soldiers and saurian-riders.

‘They’ve drawn out the eldar reserves,’ said Numeon. The eagerness for combat in his voice was obvious and spread to the rest of the Pyre Guard.

Atanarius gripped the haft of his double-bladed power sword as if strangling an enemy. Ganne’s gauntlets cracked noisily as he clenched and unclenched his fists; Leodrakk and Skatar’var swung their power mauls off their shoulder guards and into ready positions in unison. Only Igataron was still, but then raw aggression bled off him in waves anyway.

Vulkan felt it too, but coaxed the embers of his belligerence a little longer before choosing to release it.

Numeon crouched near the edge of the ridge, the pommel of his halberd staved into the ground to support him. ‘I see none of the larger beasts amongst their number.’

There were none. Vulkan had found no evidence of carnodons hidden in the jungle depths. ‘Apparently, they are wary of our strength.’

Numeon stood up again. Varrun was behind him, sharpening the edge of his gladius, but did not offer a hand to the equerry. No warrior of the Pyre Guard would ever insult another by doing such a thing.

‘You mean *your* strength, my lord.’

‘My strength *is* our strength, Numeon. We are one, the Legion and I.’ Despite his inner feelings of estrangement, this much Vulkan knew was true. Save perhaps Horus, who had his Mournival, all of the primarchs trod a solitary path. It was simply that the primarch of the Salamanders felt it more acutely than his brothers.

He was surveying the battlefield intently when his expression changed from one of aloof detachment to satisfied vindication.

A cadre of eldar had emerged into the open.

I’ve been waiting for you…

When he spoke, his deep voice was full of threat, presaging violence.

‘Now we strike.’

Numeon turned to the others, brandishing his halberd like a rallying standard. ‘Pyre Guard. Embark!’

Supported by its landing stanchions on a patch of scorched earth behind them was a Stormbird. Its idling engines quickly built to loft speed and the

vessel took off just as Vulkan and his inner-circle warriors got aboard. The other companies on the ridge would stay in reserve and could only watch as their lord took off.

The embarkation ramp was still closing when Numeon voxed the pilot from the hold.

‘Lock assault vector on the node. Missile batteries and–’

Vulkan stopped him. ‘No. We do this hand-to-hand. Put us down at the edge of the node. I want to crack that thing with my hammer personally.’

Jamming his chainsword into the eldar’s guts, Heka’tan bellowed for his warriors to drive on. ‘Advance, Fourteenth! Vulkan is watching you.’

Vulkan is always watching. As the anvil tempers us, so too does the primarch.

A welter of gore erupted from the corpse as he tore the blade free, and he was quickly pressed into defending against another attack. An eldar with an ornate sword struck at his guard. Sparks flared from the clashing weapons as Legiones Astartes aggression met alien finesse, but Heka’tan’s blood was up and he dispatched his foe with a close-range burst from his bolt pistol. Scorch marks blighted the forest green of his vambrace, occluding the lines of arterial blood staining much of his armour. It was war’s baptism and he embraced it with a shout of triumph as he sought out another foe.

This was where he wanted to be, in the thick of battle, eye to eye with the enemy and taking eldar heads. Heka’tan originated from Nocturne, he knew the terror of the slave raids; he had lived through them as a boy. Though his apotheosis had altered his memory of those torments, the intrinsic enmity remained. These were not like the slavers, their anima was different, but they were of the eldar caste so Heka’tan’s contempt felt justified.

A spit of flame spewed to his right flank, warming his pauldron and burning up a clutch of eldar snipers intent on evening the odds. He didn’t slow. Momentum was everything. It was as inexorable, methodical, and exacting as an avalanche. Gravius was fully committed too; Heka’tan had heard the shouts of the valiant Fifth as they’d closed for the kill. In truth, the near defeat in the jungle had wounded them both. The chance to excise those feelings in the fires of war was the greatest boon his primarch could have granted them.

Hammer and anvil, brothers, the words resounded in his mind, *let us show them that the Salamanders are not easily bowed.*

The melee was intense, a sweeping chaos of bloody images. Burning alien flesh was redolent on the breeze, mixed with the stale aroma of their reptilian mounts. Grunting and baying, they were finding the Legion a tougher foe to overwhelm without their massive carnodon cousins or the intervention of their witches…

…Until a lightning storm erupted around the psychic node and four enrobed figures stepped forth. Heka'tan was close enough to see it happen through the press of warring bodies. It was as if they'd been carried on the lightning itself, invisible passengers riding the eldritch energy, and merely let go of its arc. They embarked to set foot on the earth as any man would step from a ship. Bolts of verdant green still coursed over the arcane sigils, covering the psykers' trappings in the wake of teleportation. As three witches stood sentinel around the node, a fourth came forwards.

Though the eldar were an androgynous race, Heka'tan could tell that this one was male. He wore no helm but sported an array of sigilic tattoos upon his pale and imperious face. His long hair was swept back, tied up with a runic clasp that ran around his temples in two half-hemispheres that each terminated with a ruby-like gemstone at his forehead. It had the effect of a crown, and once again the Salamander was struck by the sheer decadence and arrogance of the aliens.

Unlike the others, he wore viridian robes shot through with cerulean blue. He parted the ensemble to draw forth a glittering runesword of unimaginable beauty. The weapon was psychically linked to its bearer and the blade crackled actinically as witch-fire filled the eldar's eyes.

A growing void expanded slowly around him as the other aliens backed away.

Heka'tan soon found himself with clear ground between him and the warlock.

Kaitar, Luminor and the rest of the command squad were in sync with their sergeant's orders before they were even given.

'In Vulkan's name, kill that thing!'

They charged together. The warlock watched them come, his blade held in a swordsman's guard position. He wore the leggings and tunic of a warrior-ascetic, festooned with runic iconography and arcana. Moments before the clash he tipped his head in what might have been a salute.

Heka'tan's first blow cut air and fouled in the ground, churning earth as the warlock weaved aside. Kaitar fared better but his gladius was repelled by

the flat of the eldar’s sword. Luminor snapped off a half-clip from his bolt pistol but the shells detonated harmlessly from a kine-shield impelled by the warlock’s open palm. A blast of force put the Apothecary on his back, and Brother Tu’var threw himself in the way of the eldar’s sword to save him from the subsequent sword strike. The runic blade penetrated the Salamander’s guard easily, snapping Tu’var’s gladius, cleaving into his armour and sinking up to the hilt in his chest.

Tearing the blade free, the warlock spun to cut open Angvenon’s plastron and fed a jag of lightning into the blow, spinning the Salamander and launching him off his feet. Battleplate smoking, Angvenon tried to rise, but fell onto his front and stayed down.

‘Break him!’ snarled Heka’tan, taking another swing. His world had condensed to this one fight, the rest of the battle a dim and bloody blur around him. This was the anvil, he realised, the moment when he would overcome and rise or capitulate and fall.

It was like three warrior-knights fighting a dancer as the eldar dodged their clumsy blows whilst attacking with rapid thrusts of his rune sword.

Heka’tan refused to give in.

I am Legion. I am a warrior born.

The warlock had reduced three of the Emperor’s Angels to oafs wielding lumps of noisy metal, and that rankled Heka’tan. He swung again but cut at shadows. Bringing up his pistol he pulled the trigger, but was hit by a barrage of lightning from the warlock’s clenched fist. Warning icons sprang into life instantly across the captain’s retinal display. Pain suppressors went to work in the same bio-mechanical reaction, keeping him on his feet. The bolt pistol was overloaded and exploded in his fist, showering Heka’tan with hot shrapnel. He was only dimly aware of the spasms jolting his muscles but knew he was injured when his vision started clouding.

‘Fireborn!’ It was as much a yell of defiance as it was a cry for reinforcement to the others.

Kaitar and Luminor closed in, robbing the warlock of a killing blow. The view was narrowing, made worse by his battle-helm, so Heka’tan tore at the release clamps to discard it.

It clattered to the ground and the smells, sights and sounds of the alien jungle staggered him before his genhanced senses could compensate. He still carried his chainsword, buzzing belligerently in his hand. One of Bannon’s

ex-flamer division appeared in Heka’tan’s peripheral vision and he shouted to him above the din.

‘Legionary! Hell and flame!’

A swathe of burning promethium swept over the combatants. Kaitar fell, buffeted by the blast and on fire, while Luminor shielded himself with his forearm. The warlock thwarted the flame storm with a flaring kine-shield, but as he threw up one defence he lowered another. Heka’tan leapt through the blaze with his chainsword in a two-handed grip and brought it down savagely as he landed.

A feeble, choking sound emanated from the eldar’s gullet as he swallowed a metre of churning blade. All the wards and sigils protecting the alien were broken, his preternatural swiftness undone in a single brutal moment. He glared at Heka’tan who glared back, his eyes alive with a vengeful crimson glow. Pain should have slowed him, taken him out of the fight, but the sons of Vulkan were tenacious, just as their father had taught them to be.

He came in close, teeth locked together in half grimace and half snarl. ‘Salamanders fight as one!’

A gobbet of acid spit seared the ashen cheek of the eldar as Heka’tan visited a final insult upon him before the light in the alien’s eyes dimmed and he died. Wrenching his blade from the corpse, Heka’tan prepared to fight on.

Ahead of the Salamanders was the node, but the warlock had bought the others in his coven enough time to tap into its power. A coruscation of energy was rippling between the three witches as if the stone was feeding and enhancing their abilities.

Heka’tan had time to lift his chainblade in a rallying gesture before a lightning whip struck out from the node. The eldar coven channelled it, a bending, crackling bolt of energy that ripped Dreadnoughts off their feet and flattened Salamanders. It swept across the Legion in a wave, leaving electrified and scorched battleplate behind it. The eldar still engaged in the melee were struck too – the shimmering beam was undiscriminating – and Heka’tan realised then just what they were willing to sacrifice to protect the node. Mercifully, he and his command squad had been spared from the first bolt but a second was already building.

Unleashed in a matter of seconds, the bolt would easily outstrip him for pace. It hurt like hellfire but still Heka’tan ran with all the fading strength in his body.

Engines screaming, the Stormbird drew closer to the lightning storm. A flash lit the darkened interior of the hold, revealing the forbidding form of Vulkan standing by the open side-hatch. It was drawn as wide as it would go and the wind whipped within the gunship, buffeting the oaths of moment pinned to the warriors' armour. Vulkan was stooped, eyes narrowed as he focused on the node. Its pointed tip was the focal point for the storm and the runes along its surface glowed in sympathetic union with the lightning. Even from above and at distance, it was monolithic. Destroying it would not be easy. The grip Vulkan had around his hammer's haft tightened.

Behind him, the Pyre Guard waited with barely fettered aggression.

Unleash us…

The primarch could sense what they desired as surely as he felt it in his own blood.

A crack of lightning surged past the side of the ship, clipping one of its wings, and the hold shuddered and pitched. Smoke trailed from the wound in the armour plate. It wasn't serious enough for the Stormbird to withdraw but they'd come about as far as they could without risking a crash.

Vulkan didn't even reach for a handhold. His body was utterly still, his intensity unbroken.

Slowly, the pilot brought them back on course and the node loomed again, several metres below and wreathed with crackling power. The witch coven at its foundation was ready to siphon its energy into another bolt. The devastation wrought by the first must have been egregious to witness on the ground and from above its destructive trail was all too plain to see.

It seemed strange for the eldar to protect the edifice with such vehemence when their tactics suggested an entirely different method of warfare. Here, by holding onto the obelisk, they exposed all of their weakness and mitigated their strengths. The suspicion of something unseen and unknown entered the primarch's mind, but for now he could not affect it, whatever it was. Instead, he concentrated on the thing he could do something about.

Vulkan crouched a little lower and waited until the Stormbird banked so the hatch was angled down towards the node. The hammer he bore was a weapon of his own creation. *Thunderhead* was its name. He'd fashioned it on Nocturne in honour of N'bel and his heritage. Captured storms thrashed within its ornate head, beaten into the metal through many long hours of toil in the forge. There was no other like it. No legionary could wield it. No man

could even lift it. Vulkan alone possessed the strength and mastery to bend it to his will.

He donned his drake-helm and it mag-locked to his gorget.

‘Do you know what comes after lightning, brothers?’

The Pyre Guard did not answer. Instead, they readied their weapons.

Vulkan’s eyes flashed with inner fire.

‘Thunder…’

He leapt from the hold.

Shrieking air whipped past Vulkan as he plummeted through the storm-wracked sky. He descended like a hammer-wielding comet, a roar of the firedrakes of Mount Deathfire on his lips. His salamander cloak flapped wildly behind him, as if the spirit of the beast it once belonged to had returned and approved of its master’s exultation.

A grimace formed on his face behind his helmet as the primarch reached terminal velocity. The wind became an ear-piercing whine as he descended through it. Surrounded by the tempest, he had never felt more alive than in that moment. He wondered briefly if Corax and Sanguinius felt the same elation as they soared through the heavens.

As he closed on the obelisk, Vulkan clenched his hammer in both hands and lifted it above his head. At the moment of impact, he smashed the arrowed summit of the obelisk like he was hitting the head of a nail. With a tremor of energy, the psychic node ruptured and shattered. Vulkan didn’t slow but kept driving through the ancient stone, following an almighty crack that spread through the obelisk’s core. Shockwaves throbbed outwards from the breaking stone, chunks of it pummelling the eldar who looked up at the falling rock and wailed from below before being crushed. Each successive energy pulse emitted from the destroyed obelisk jolted the now transfixed coven with greater and greater violence. The eldar witches had made themselves conduits for the psychic power in the node and now they were being fed every last residual trace of it. No mortal creature could withstand such a backlash of energy. Vulkan landed and the earth blasted outwards from his craterous impact. In synchrony with it, the witches died one by one. Their eyes burned and flesh melted until at last their skulls exploded and they collapsed, headless, to the ground.

Dust and fire surrounded the primarch in a churning pall. He was crouched on one knee, his hammer embedded in the earth. He stayed like that for several moments. His armour rose and fell as he breathed. The

remains of the node collapsed around him. Great clefts of stone sheared away and broke into fragments. By the time it was done, Vulkan was encircled by a belt of shattered rock. The engraved runes had all been broken and their captured light bled away.

Already battered by the resurgent Salamanders, the eldar capitulated and fell back.

Victory cries extolling the Legion, the Fifth and the 14th Fireborn, appealed to Vulkan's pride as he heard them on the breeze. Beneath the snarling visage of his drake-helm, he smiled and was aware of someone approaching.

Numeon regarded his primarch from the edge of the devastation.

The rest of the Pyre Guard were just stepping from the Stormbird and cutting down the enemy stragglers.

'I didn't think you would jump,' Numeon confessed.

Vulkan lifted his head and stood.

'It was an impulse.'

The equerry appraised the circle of broken node stone.

'I also thought it would be more difficult.'

Vulkan raised an eyebrow. 'You think that was easy?' When he removed his drake-helm he was still smiling. Rolling his shoulders and then stowing *Thunderhead*, he turned his attention to the dead psykers. 'Dabbling with sorcery has its own rewards.'

Numeon followed him as he walked beyond the circle and out into the emptying battlefield. 'So it would seem, my lord.' He regarded the burned and headless eldar corpses impassively. 'Hard to tell now, but I didn't see their seer amongst the coven.'

Vulkan didn't need to look, he knew. 'The female was not amongst them, which is… *perplexing*.'

'She has likely already fled. They must realise this is a war they cannot win.'

'Perhaps, but then why fight it at all?'

The eldar were on the run again now, all attempts at a tactical withdrawal abandoned in favour of individual survival. They had nothing left to protect and so no reason to linger in a fight for which they were unsuited.

As with the previous battle in the jungle, the natives began surfacing with the cessation of hostility. They appeared moribund, even terrified by their liberators, and clung to each other for support. Some of the children amongst

them were sobbing. A girl-child leaned down to touch a dead eldar's finger until her mother chastened her and she shrank back into the gloom. Army units with attached remembrancers were already gathering the refugees together.

'Do they seem less than pleased to see us, Numeon?' Vulkan asked.

'I find it hard to differentiate their reactions from that of any human I encounter, my lord.'

Vulkan sighed, unable to be completely dispassionate. 'They are scared, but of us, not of the aliens. I wonder if–' He stopped when he saw the bodies of the tribespeople amongst the dead. Vulkan's brow creased with consternation. 'I didn't realise that civilians were at risk inside the battle zone.'

Army medics and field surgeons were dragging away dead natives along with the Phaerians. Most were men and women, but Vulkan saw children too amongst the slain. The cold face of a girl-child, clutching a wooden effigy, haunted the primarch for a moment. Were it not for the dark stain colouring her hemp smock, she might have been asleep. In repose, the girl-child's face looked particularly innocent. Vulkan had seen horror like this before, after the raids and when Nocturne's surface split with anger. He had witnessed bodies dragged from the rubble, choked by ash or burned black by fire.

'A warrior chooses his path. It is violent and the threat of death ever present, but these people…' He shook his head slowly, as if only just comprehending. 'This was not supposed to happen.'

Numeon was lost for an answer. When Varrun approached with a hololithic wand, the equerry's frown turned into an expression of relief. 'Word from the Legions, my lord.'

Still distracted, gaze lingering on the humans, Vulkan took his time to respond. 'Set it down,' he said at length, and Varrun impaled the wand into the ground and activated it.

Spilling out from a triangular apex of hazy light, an image of Ferrus Manus resolved itself.

Both Pyre Guard sank to one knee immediately in deference to the other primarch.

Ferrus Manus was still wearing his battle-helm and his armour bore evidence that he'd been in the thick of the fighting for the desert region. The gleaming plate was sand scoured and reflected the light of the sun behind him. He removed his helm and his silver eyes glittered like chips of ice.

Ferrus was typically taciturn. ‘Are the jungles won, brother?’

Vulkan nodded. ‘The eldar node has been neutralised. An easier fight than we first believed but with its share of blood spent to the cause. How fare my brother Legions?’

The primarch of the Iron Hands growled, ‘Still contested, but I shall not be denied. We encountered difficulty with our mechanised elements. Much of my force is on foot and the Army divisions are coping poorly.’

The Iron Hands mantra, *Flesh is Weak*, was almost written indelibly into Ferrus’s scowl. He respected humans but was also frustrated by their frailty.

Vulkan decided to change tack. ‘And what of the Death Guard? Has our brother lived up to his dogged nature?’

The answer came reluctantly. ‘Mortarion has levelled the node, though I question what is left for humanity to colonise. I fear he has turned the ice fields into a tainted waste and damaged much of the continent’s geology into the bargain.’

A crackle of interference marred the image for a moment. Distant explosions rippled behind Ferrus, but he paid them no heed.

‘The jungle region borders the edge of the desert. I can divert some of my divisions to provide reinforcement, brother,’ offered Vulkan when the hololith was restored again.

Ferrus’s crag-like coldness expressed exactly what he thought of that suggestion.

‘Unnecessary.’

‘Then your victory will be close at hand.’ Vulkan tried not to make his tone consoling. That would only enrage his brother.

‘The desert continent is vast, but it *will* yield to me.’ Behind him, bolter fire chorused amongst the low *crump* of explosions that were growing increasingly less distant. Ferrus turned his ear a fraction. ‘We are engaging again. Consolidate your forces in the jungle and await further orders.’

The hololith blanked out with the severance of connection.

‘Pride, not flesh, is weak,’ returned Numeon with a resigned shake of the head.

Vulkan’s eyes were downcast, and he muttered, ‘You wouldn’t understand.’

Their father had sought to make them perfect, much more than human in every sense. Vulkan and his brothers eclipsed their legionary sons with their greater strength, skill and intellect, but they also possessed very human

flaws. To be one amongst so many sons made it difficult to attain a father's love and validation. Pride, in one form or another, drove them all in its way. It created fraternal rivalry, too, and Vulkan wondered if it would ever become more than that.

'Lord?'

Numeon's voice brought him back.

Across the battlefield, a Salamander was approaching. A sheathed chainsword sat on his back, and his gait betrayed some injuries. He bowed before his primarch, having already removed his battle-helm.

Salamanders meet eye-to-eye.

'Rise, Salamander.'

The warrior obeyed, standing and saluting against his plastron.

'Captain Heka'tan,' Vulkan asserted, looking down at the warrior, 'of the Fourteenth Fireborn. You are tempered, my son.'

Heka'tan's armour was scorched and battered from battle. He'd also lost his sidearm and was favouring his left leg. His left eye was swollen and there were several deep gashes upon his forehead. The suggestion of an honour scar on his thick neck was visible just above the upper rim of his gorget.

'The anvil was indeed testing, my lord.' He bowed his head again.

'You've no need to be so humble. You are a captain and have shed blood for your Legion this day. We are victorious.'

Heka'tan didn't look so sure.

Vulkan's eyes narrowed. 'You have something to tell me, Captain Heka'tan?'

'I do, my lord. We have found the Army scouts that located the node.'

Since the coordinates had been broadcast to the rest of the Imperial forces, all contact had been lost with the advance reconnaissance sections.

Sensing the captain's fatalism, Vulkan became solemn. 'And they are dead.'

'Not all of them, primarch.' Heka'tan's fiery gaze could not hide his apprehension. 'There was a sole survivor, a non-combatant.'

'A remembrancer?'

'So I understand, my lord.'

'And is he unharmed?' It was almost as if Vulkan already knew the answer by the expression on Heka'tan's face.

'Miraculously so.'

Vulkan broke eye contact to look into the distance where the pursuing Imperial forces were harrying the enemy deeper into the jungle. He purposely averted his gaze from the growing piles of dead natives. ‘Where is this survivor now?’

Heka’tan paused. ‘There is more.’

Looking back down, Vulkan’s blazing eyes were questioning.

‘He says there is another node, much bigger and more powerful than the one you destroyed.’

A muscle spasm in Vulkan’s cheek gave the only hint of his displeasure.

‘Take me to him at once.’

The remembrancer cut an unassuming figure. Dressed in plain robes of an obscure Terran style, the survivor sat on the ground with his eyes open and alert. It was only the fact he was surrounded by the bodies of the Army scout division sent to locate the node that made his presence in the jungle incongruous.

‘You are the primarch of the Salamanders Legion?’ he asked.

‘I am.’ Vulkan approached slowly, bidding his Pyre Guard to wait outside the circle of the dead Army scouts.

It was an order that displeased Numeon and the others, but they obeyed nonetheless.

Vulkan looked around at the massacre. From the position of the bodies and how they’d fallen, it appeared the scouts had made a last stand. His shifted his gaze to peer deeper into the jungle.

‘You were followed?’

‘From the site of the fourth obelisk, yes.’

‘And you got as far as this point before the eldar caught you.’

‘Precisely.’

When Vulkan looked back at the man, who seemed wise but somehow youthful at the same time, his eyes were penetrating.

‘How is it they all died and you alone lived?’

‘I hid.’

Vulkan stared at him, trying to ascertain if what the remembrancer was saying was the truth.

The man seemed content to sit amongst the dead and hadn’t yet moved.

‘You don’t believe me?’

‘I am still deciding,’ Vulkan answered honestly. He stepped towards him.

Numeon’s armour shifted before he warned, ‘Primarch…’

Vulkan held up his hand to cool his equerry's anxiety. The remembrancer's gaze flicked over to the Pyre Guard and back again.

'I don't think your bodyguards like me.'

Vulkan was standing before him and looked down on the man. 'They just don't trust you.'

'That's a pity.'

'What is your name, remembrancer?'

'Verace.'

'Then come with me, Verace, and tell me all you know about this obelisk.'

Vulkan turned and as he was leaving the site of the massacre he passed by Numeon.

The primarch kept his voice low. 'Watch him closely.'

Verace got to his feet and smoothed down his robes.

Numeon glared at him, and nodded.

There was something… *strange* about this Verace, but Vulkan wasn't threatened by him. After all, what threat could a flesh and blood human pose to a primarch? But as he was walking back to the Stormbird, Vulkan was reminded of a time when he'd met another stranger, one he'd known as the Outlander…

Vulkan knew his grip was failing. Even with his prodigious strength, he knew he couldn't hold on to the edge of the cliff with one hand and still cling to the drake hide with the other indefinitely.

It had been a magnificent beast of vermillion scale, thick and gnarled like overlapping shields. The firedrake's ribbed belly was taut with muscle, its jaws wide and powerful. The grumbling mountain had summoned it and the drake had answered, emerging from its lowest deeps.

The spear Vulkan had forged to kill it was lost to the lava chasm below him. Hours of crafting had been undone in an instant when the mountain's blood reclaimed the weapon; just as his life would be undone should he slip.

The sun baked his naked back but the heat of it was ebbing. Steam and smoke clouded Vulkan's eyes, filling his nose with sulphur and ash. Hours had passed since the volcano had erupted and tossed him over the edge. Only his superlative reflexes and strength had saved him, or forestalled his death at least.

Even Vulkan, champion of Hesiod and slayer of dusk-wraiths, could be destroyed by lava.

After the defeat of the slavers, word had spread quickly around the major townships of Nocturne. Within weeks, the tribal kings of the other six settlements and their emissaries had greeted the leaders of Hesiod and asked to meet the blacksmiter's son who was rapidly becoming a legend.

As he hung precariously on the rocky precipice, Vulkan considered this would be a poor end for such a figure. He slipped and for a moment thought it was over. A sense of falling overtook him, but he reached out to salvage a desperate handhold on a lower crag. Dust and grit fell in a hard rain, beating against his body, but he held on.

Though his heart was pounding like a hammer upon an anvil in his chest, he tried not to breathe too deeply. This close to the lava trench, the air was a poisonous miasma thick with sulphurous alkalis. He could already feel the blistering around his nose and the skin of his throat. An ordinary man would have died long before now. It only enhanced the belief that he was not truly of these people, that Nocturne was not his birth home. Vulkan's father, N'bel, had said as much to him before the tournament. He had promised to seal the vault below the forge and did so, but he couldn't suppress the truth. Vulkan had asked him outright before the events began but the answer hadn't come. N'bel, stifled by looming grief, couldn't tell him. Perhaps now, he never would and Vulkan would be forever ignorant of his origins.

Fingers stiff as stone, his arm burning like all the fires of the forge were ignited in it, Vulkan thought about letting go of the hide. With both hands he could probably clamber up the rock face to safety. The bubbling, cracking refrain of the lava below seemed to urge him, or maybe it was trying to entice him to fall.

The last eight days had taken their toll, though. Vulkan didn't know what strength was left in his limbs. In truth, he could barely feel them any more and had to constantly fight a strange sense of weightlessness that threatened to loosen his grip unconsciously.

'You will not beat me.'

He spoke the words aloud to galvanise himself.

The lava crackled below in what was beginning to sound like rumbling laughter.

It baffled reason how the pale-faced stranger had managed to match him through every trial. No one knew where he had come from, though some suspected he hailed from the nomadic tribes of Ignea. Vulkan doubted it. When he'd come into the town, this Outlander, as he'd come to be known,

was wearing garb unfamiliar to any Nocturnean. From Heliosa to Themis, there were cultural derivations amongst the people of the planet but they shared common traits. The Outlander shared none.

His boasts were utterly audacious. Vulkan remembered the derision he'd caused when claiming he could best anyone in the town, even the champion of Hesiod, in the tournament. Out of respect, perhaps sheer disbelief, Vulkan had kept a straight face.

'Let him enter if he wishes,' he'd said privately to N'bel when questioned. 'The fool will either give up or lose his life to the mountain. Let the anvil decide.'

Considering his current situation, those comments now seemed remarkably short-sighted.

Below him, the river of molten rock beckoned and thrust Vulkan back to his potentially fatal present.

How could he fail? What would his people think of him if this pallid outsider beat him?

Vulkan clung to the drake hide by its long tail. As it drifted in the hot vapours emanating from the lava trench, he knew he had to sacrifice his pride for the sake of his life. He was about to loosen his grip when he heard a cry from across the craggy mountain summit.

'Vulkan!'

Peering through a thickening belt of smoke, Vulkan saw the hazy outline of the stranger in the distance. The Outlander was bounding over the rocks towards him. Over his shoulder was the largest drake hide Vulkan had ever seen. He blinked back the stinging sensation in his eyes, trying to be sure it wasn't just a mirage caused by exhaustion and the sulphurous air.

The hide in Vulkan's defiant grasp was huge, but this… this was massive. It easily eclipsed that of the Nocturnean and suddenly Vulkan's pride felt all the cheaper because of it.

Moving swiftly, the Outlander hoisted the immense pelt from his back and cast it into a vast lava pool that stood between him and the rocky outcrop where Vulkan was clinging on. Bridging the bubbling morass with the hide, the Outlander leapt across and landed on the other side. Rushing to the edge of the precipice, he thrust his hand down and seized Vulkan's wrist.

'Hold on…'

In a feat of incredible strength, the stranger lifted Vulkan to safety, drake hide and all.

Exhausted, they lay upon the barren rock for a time before the Outlander rose and helped Vulkan to his feet.

In the distance, the lava pool had claimed the Outlander's mighty prize.

'We can't go back that way,' he said, with no hint of remorse.

Vulkan clapped the Outlander's shoulder, feeling some of his strength returning.

'You saved my life.'

'If you hadn't clung on as long as you did, I might not have been afforded the opportunity to do so.'

Vulkan looked to the lava pool where the last remnants of the drake hide were gradually being consumed.

'You could have returned to the town as champion.'

'At the cost of my opponent's life? What kind of hollow victory would that have been?'

Swollen flakes of ash were clouding the air and the breeze brought with it the stench of burning. It promised fire to come.

'The mountain is not yet done,' Vulkan said. 'It may erupt again. We should go back to Hesiod.'

The Outlander nodded and the two of them began the long climb back down the mountain.

Celebration greeted Vulkan upon his return. The entire township, together with the chieftains and emissaries of the other six settlements of Nocturne, had gathered to witness the conclusion of the tournament.

N'bel was amongst the first to see his son back safely. Though he was not quite the hulk of a man he used to be, the blacksmiter embraced Vulkan fiercely.

'You did it, boy. I knew you would.' He turned, his arm sweeping across the buoyant crowd behind him. 'All of Nocturne hails you.'

The shouts of his name echoed loudly in Vulkan's ears. Tribal kings came forwards to greet him and bask in his reflected glory. Bellows of affirmation and fealty rang out alongside the vigorous applause of the throng. Only the Outlander was still and quiet, his gaze on Vulkan. But there was no judgement, no quarrel in his eyes. He just watched.

Ban'ek, the tribal king of Themis, came to the front of the crowd and bowed approvingly at the tournament champion.

'A worthy trophy,' he said, gesturing to the drake scale hide still slung over Vulkan's shoulder. 'You will look noble indeed with it as your mantle.'

Vulkan had almost forgotten it was there.

‘No,’ he uttered simply.

Ban’ek was nonplussed. ‘I don’t understand.’

Vulkan shook his head. ‘All of this, your adulation and acclaim, it is undeserved.’ He took the hide from his shoulder and presented it to the Outlander.

N’bel reached out to his son to stop him, but was waved away. ‘Vulkan, what are you doing?’

‘To sacrifice pride for the sake of a life, that is true nobility.’ He met the Outlander’s gaze and strangely found approval in his fathomless eyes. ‘This honour belongs to you, stranger.’

‘Humility and self sacrifice go well together, Vulkan,’ he replied. ‘You are everything I hoped you would become.’

It was not the response Vulkan had expected, not at all.

His face creased in confusion. ‘Who are you?’

‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

Verace was sitting across from Vulkan, his face half swallowed by the shadows of the command tent.

Inside in the gloom, the primarch’s eyes were burning coals. It gave him an intensity most humans found difficult to look upon; most humans apart from the remembrancer in front of him.

‘You don’t have a scratch on you.’

‘Is that unusual?’

‘For someone in a war zone, yes.’

‘You are unscathed.’

Vulkan laughed in mild amusement and looked away. ‘I am different.’

‘How?’

He turned to face the insouciant human, his humour deteriorating with his rising annoyance.

‘I am…’

‘Alone?’

Vulkan’s brow furrowed as if he was contemplating a problem to which he couldn’t see the solution. He was about to answer when he decided upon a different tack.

‘You should fear me, human, or at the least be intimidated.’

Vulkan came forwards and clenched his fist just a hand’s width from the remembrancer’s face. ‘I could crush you for your insolence.’

Verace appeared unmoved by the apparent threat.

‘And will you?’

The angry grimace of Vulkan’s face faded and he backed away to seethe. When he spoke again, his voice was thick and husky. ‘No.’

A strange silence fell between them, with neither man nor primarch breaking the deadlock. In the end, Vulkan said, ‘Tell me again what the obelisk looks like.’

The searching look on Verace’s face disappeared and he smiled before his eyes narrowed, remembering. ‘It is not an *obelisk* as such, but more like an arch as if it were part of a gate.’ He described it in the air with his hands. ‘See? Do you see, Vulkan?’

‘Yes.’ His voice was not as self-assured as he’d intended. ‘What of the defenders? How would you gauge their strength?’

‘I’m not a warrior, so any tactical appraisal I could provide would likely be of small use.’

‘Try anyway.’

‘I am curious as to why I am explaining this to you in person and not one of your captains.’

Vulkan growled, ‘Because they do not possess my patience. Now, the aliens’ strength…’

Verace bowed his head curtly to apologise. ‘Very well. The eldar are concentrated in number around the arch. Many more than were protecting the node. I saw… *witches* too and more of the reptilian beasts. The quadrupedal ones were the first to hunt us down. Rookeries fill the upper canopy, several times in excess of those I’d seen previously. There are larger beasts as well, though I had little time to study them what with all the running.’

‘More comprehensive than I would’ve given you credit for,’ Vulkan conceded. He shook his head.

‘I confound you, don’t I,’ said Verace.

‘You escape a massacre unharmed and speak of your ordeal as if it were nothing. You address a primarch like you are speaking to a colleague in your order. Yes, your actions are unusual. There are bodies everywhere, not just soldiers but some of the natives too.’ In the aftermath of the battle, Army scouts had discovered even more dead tribespeople who’d been caught in the vicious crossfire. The sight of the slain girl-child privately disturbed Vulkan

still, and he'd ordered all of the native dead to be treated with the same care and respect as the Legion's own.

'War does not discriminate, Verace,' said Vulkan. 'Be mindful of where you are or it might be you we have to bury next.'

'She reached you, didn't she?'

'Who?'

'The girl, the one killed by the indiscriminate war you mentioned.'

Vulkan's face betrayed his discomfort. 'These people suffer. She reminded me of that. But how did you–'

'I saw you glance at her when we were walking to the tent. At least, I assumed it was her that made you avert your eyes.' Verace licked his lips. 'You wish to save them, don't you?'

Vulkan nodded, seeing no reason to be evasive. 'If I can. What kind of liberators would we be if the worlds we bring back to humanity merely burn? What fate for Ibsen then?'

'Poor ones, I suppose. But what is Ibsen?'

'It is… this world. Its name.'

'I thought its designation was One-Five-Four Four.'

'It is, but–'

'So you wish to save the people of *Ibsen*, is that what you mean?'

'Ibsen, designation One-Five-Four Four – Yes, I just said that. What difference does it make?'

'A great deal. What made you change your mind?'

Vulkan frowned again. 'What do you mean?' He was partially distracted by the sound of voices outside.

Verace's intensity never wavered. 'What made you think they were a people worthy of salvation?'

'I didn't at first.'

'And now?'

'I don't know.'

'Discover the answer to that and your troubled mind will rest easier.'

'I am not troubled.'

'Really?'

'I am–'

Numeon, appearing at the entrance to the tent, interrupted Vulkan's reply.

'What is it, brother?' asked the primarch, masking his irritation.

'Ferrus Manus has arrived, my lord.'

Victory was closer at hand than Vulkan had suspected for the Iron Hands. Only moments after their last council, Ferrus had contacted him again, informing him of the Iron Hands success in the desert. Unlike his brother, Vulkan accepted Ferrus's offer of reinforcement after he'd told him of the second larger obelisk in the jungle. It seemed to placate the Gorgon's zealous mood greatly, and his earlier wounded pride was salved by the opportunity for his Legion to aid the Salamanders. Vulkan was sanguine: he had no need to prove himself or his Legion.

'I'll meet him at once.' Vulkan retrieved his drake-helm from where he'd left it on a side console. He looked back at Verace as he picked it up. 'We'll talk again, you and I.'

The remembrancer remained impassive, giving nothing away. 'I hope so, Vulkan. I sincerely do.'

Heka'tan's 14th Fireborn stood shoulder-to-shoulder with divisions from the Iron Hands. The warriors of the X Legion were armoured in black ceramite with a white hand insignia emblazoned upon their left shoulder guards. Several carried augmentations: fingers, cybernetic eyes, entire skulls or bionic limbs to replace those lost in battle. They were a stern sight, as cold and granite-like as their Medusan home world. But they were stalwart, and Heka'tan welcomed them in his ranks.

For once, his company was part of the second wave, arrayed behind the Firedrakes. Vulkan was a distant figure at their centre, surrounded by the fabled Pyre Guard. The rest of the Iron Hands, the elite warriors who called themselves the Morlocks, were with their primarch on the other side of the battlefield. Heka'tan had spoken briefly with their captain, an Iron Hand called Gabriel Santar, before a plan of attack was drawn up. The equerry's bionics were extensive; both of his legs and his left arm were machine, not flesh. The effect initially dehumanised him for Heka'tan, but after mere minutes of talking with him the Salamander learned he was a wise and temperate warrior who fostered a deep respect for the XVIII Legion. Heka'tan hoped this would not be the last time he fought alongside the noble first-captain of the Iron Hands.

Heka'tan had heard the survivor of the Army scouts massacre had provided vital information in locating the eldar's last node. As suspected, this node was utterly unlike the others. He could see it easily above the divisions in the front lines, a vast white stone arch that swept into the sky like a talon. In common with the psychic node Vulkan had destroyed, the

arch was engraved with arcane runes and bejewelled with gemstones. It stood in the centre of an immense clearing, barren save for a dozen or so broken columns that jutted from the ground, the architecture of an ancient or forgotten culture. Even the jungle canopy had been stripped back to accommodate the arch, or rather had grown up in organic empathy with it. Massive roots and vines, thicker than Heka'tan's armoured leg, entwined the plinth-like base and coiled all over the surface as if it had been dormant for many centuries.

Several lesser menhirs encircled the arch. Before each one stood one of the remaining witch coven. They were chanting, or rather… *singing*. Psychic energy played between them, creating a circuit of crackling light that formed an iridescent shield around the arch.

Together with their psykers, the aliens had amassed the entirety of their forces in defence of this last edifice. Cloaked and armoured eldar were arrayed in ranks opposing the Imperium. Anti-gravity gun platforms hovered between the enemy cohorts, who were differentiated by the runic symbols on their faces and conical helms. A great herd of raptor-riders occupied one flank; a score of brutal carnodons anchored the other. The beasts champed and snorted at one another, pawing at the ground in agitation. Above them, the jungle canopy rustled with the susurrus of shifting membranous wings, and shrilled with the high-pitched bleat of pterosaurs. Slower moving stegosaurs lumbered into position, responding to the sudden presence of the Imperial forces. Heavy cannons were attached to their broad backs, managed by a crew of eldar inside an elegant howdah.

Having clashed with the aliens twice already, Heka'tan knew pitched battle was not where they excelled, but the Legion had broken their ambushes and the primarch had destroyed their node with a single hammer strike. Outmatched, they had little choice now but to stand and fight. Certainly, they were all willing to die in defence of this edifice.

Heka'tan could only guess at the arch's purpose. Allegedly it was a gate, although to where it led to was unknown. He only knew his duty was to kill the aliens protecting it.

Still several hundred metres from the edge of the battle, the order to advance flashed up on his retinal display. As well as the 14th Fireborn, Heka'tan had several Phaerian cohorts in his charge, and gave clipped and immediate deployment orders to their discipline-masters. With the Army divisions mobilising, he had time for a last message to a friend.

‘Bring the fires of Prometheus to them, brother,’ he said to Gravius across the feed.

‘Aye, Vulkan is with us. I’ll see you at the end, Heka’tan.’

Heka’tan cut the link and turned to his command squad. Battered but still at full strength, the Salamanders looked ready for some retribution for the wounding they’d received at the hands of the warlock.

‘Into the fires of battle, captain,’ said Brother Tu’var, who’d survived the blade through his chest with typical resilience.

A salvaged bolt pistol sat in Heka’tan’s holster to replace the one he’d lost. His chainsword still carried the stains of that battle. He lifted it into the air and cried out.

‘Fourteenth Fireborn, on my lead… To the anvil, brothers!’

A farinaceous dust settled on the clearing, created in the wake of the barrage that preceded the Imperial attack. Churned earth, loosened and sent skywards by the continuous explosive impacts from grenades and heavy cannon, had formed a grimy emulsion with the natural heady atmosphere of the jungle. Tips of columns loomed in the fog like broken islands floating on a dirty sea. Enemies and allies alike became spectral silhouettes in the mud-haze. Smoke from countless missile expulsions and venting rocket tubes drifted in lazy clouds, whilst lances of sunlight broke the leaf canopy above and turned grainy in the thickened atmosphere, only adding to the confusion.

It was no barrier to Vulkan. He advanced through the gritty miasma keenly, despatching foes with his hammer as they presented themselves. His Pyre Guard were arrayed around him and together they’d cut a bloody trail to reach the halfway marker. A tactical map overlaying one corner of his retinal display told him the precise distance remaining to the arch. So vast and sprawling was the alien edifice that it dominated the short horizon constantly, seen through an iridescent kine-shield. Icons identifying the rest of his Legion suggested they were making solid progress too, but the primarch and his praetorians had a definite lead. The Army divisions were faring less well.

Sustained auto-fire had mulched much of the jungle foliage into a mist that got into the lungs of the Phaerians and any of their leaders who weren’t wearing rebreather masks. Between the screams of those brought down by the eldar’s salvoes or assassinated by sniper shot, Vulkan heard men choking on the vaporised vegetation as they were pushed into the breach by their eager overseers.

With the cessation of the initial Army bombardment, the air was thinning again. A section of broken column resolved through the slow dispersal of settling earth particles. Architecturally, it was not unlike the node temple they'd encountered earlier and suggested a civilisation that predated human colonisation had once dominated this world. Likely it had been the eldar, but in more halcyon times. Vulkan saw the bodies of the aliens strewn around its circular plinth. It was a grim reminder of just how much they'd lost in the dark millennia before the Great Crusade and man's pre-eminence in the galaxy.

That the eldar had lasted this long was testament to their persistence and courage. Any foe willing to try to resist the strength and power of two primarchs was worthy of respect, however grudgingly given.

What bothered Vulkan, as he'd torn into the aliens' ranks, was why they were so dogged when they faced certain annihilation. Flee and they would live. What did it matter if this world was lost to them? It was little more than a wild frontier world cluttered with broken remnants of stone that no longer mattered. Why would the eldar cling to it with such fatal determination? As before, the sense of something unknown sprang to the fore of Vulkan's mind, but he was unable to give his suspicions form or cause. For now, combat focused his mind, gave him a purpose that supplanted all other concerns.

From the initial weapons exchange, the battle had devolved into a series of closer skirmishes.

Revealed through the clearing fog, Army divisions were assaulting in force on several fronts with bayonets, knives and close-quarters gunfire. Sheer weight of numbers and the single-minded drive of their overseers and discipline-masters provided the men with small but increasingly significant victories. The eldar outmatched them one-on-one but their numbers were dwindling.

Divisions from both the Salamanders and Iron Hands were making punishing inroads, and the air was rank with the stink of reptilian carcasses. Both Legions were stolid and determined. Vulkan's sons attacked with a cleansing flame, burning the eldar back and crushing any survivors with a combined push, whereas the warriors of Ferrus Manus engaged the enemy with the same molten anger as their primarch, breaking the aliens with shock and awe. The Morlocks in particular were singular fighters, the equal of the Firedrakes, and Vulkan was glad to be fighting alongside his brother and his praetorians. Even so, he would not be outdone lightly.

Such was the ferocity of Vulkan and his Pyre Guard, a widening gyre of dead and broken eldar had formed around them. It presented a rare moment to pause, and in the brief respite, Vulkan looked for Ferrus. He wasn't hard to find.

The Gorgon fought without his battle-helm and was bludgeoning his way into the enemy's flank. *Forgebreaker* rose and fell like a metronome in his silver hands, crushing skulls and smashing eldar into the air with the hammer's every formidable swing. Zeal and fury radiated from his granite face as he drove the Morlocks relentlessly. Blistering fire flared between both sides but none of the Iron Hands slowed, let alone fell. The kindred of eldar fighting them was soon overwhelmed and lethally despatched, but more enemies were coming.

Encouraged by the bloodletting, a pack of crimson-scaled carnodons snorted a throaty challenge. Their riders bellowed for the monsters to charge. The Iron Hands were still cutting down a few defiant stragglers from the eldar kindred when Ferrus Manus bellowed at them. Vulkan could read his lips and imagine his wrath.

'Finish them now!'

In his eagerness to end the fight quickly, a wayward blow from the primarch's hammer crunched through the side of a nearby column and sent it tumbling. Vulkan balked when he saw who was in its path.

Like a ghost materialising corporeally in the fog, the boy-child appeared from nowhere. His naked torso was drenched in sweat and someone else's blood, and he wailed blindly as he fled. As if sensing the sudden danger, the boy-child froze abruptly in the shadow of the falling column and could only watch his impending death approaching. He raised his arms feebly over his eyes.

Don't look, child…

Vulkan was running, leaving his praetorians behind him. It would not be enough. Without intervention, the column would crush the boy-child. He cried out, knowing that to even witness the death of such an innocent would forever stain his immortal soul.

Arrested from his battle frenzy by his brother's anguish, Ferrus turned and saw the danger.

'First-Captain!' he bellowed, and Gabriel Santar was there.

At his urging, the Morlocks drove on ahead of him to meet the carnodons with bolters flaring. Santar lagged behind and threw himself against the

collapsing column. Using both hands, he caught the chunk of broken stone and held it. Servos in his bionic arm and legs whined in protest at the sudden strain they were put under.

He had enough strength spare to turn his head towards the terrified infant. His grey eyes churned with the turmoil of a captured storm as he glowered down at him. ‘Flee now!’

Screaming, the boy-child ran.

And as if heralding a flood, there were suddenly hundreds of the fleeing humans. Like leaves blown about on an eddying breeze, the frightened flock scurried in all directions and from everywhere at once.

‘Terra and the Emperor,’ breathed Ferrus Manus, unable to comprehend the insane exodus.

‘My lord…’

In spite of his cybernetics, Gabriel Santar’s legs buckled to the knee and his elbows bent with the sheer immense weight of the column. The Gorgon was quick to relieve him, stowing *Forgebreaker* and hoisting the broken chunk of rock from his equerry as though it were little more than a bolter.

He roared to the Morlocks, who were seconds from hand-to-hand combat, ‘*Down!*’ and hurled the shattered pillar like a spear. The front carnodon took the brunt of the improvised missile, howling in agony as its forelegs were broken. It hit the ground muzzle first, trammelling the other beasts that tripped and blundered, losing the impetus of their attack. The Morlocks were quickly amongst them, Santar having rejoined their ranks.

Ferrus Manus glowered at Vulkan, his gimlet gaze singling out the other primarch easily in the throng.

‘I suppose you’re going to tell me to try not to kill them?’ he declared through the feed.

It was easier said than done. Though the boy-child had reached relative safety, Vulkan saw hundreds fleeing in his wake. The natives were running loose all over the killing fields, heedless of the danger. Emerging from their nests and hidden places in a panicked mass, it was as if the humans had been displaced from a major settlement by the eldar war host. Either that or it was some desperate gambit on the aliens’ part to try to disrupt the Imperium’s inevitable victory.

Vulkan felt his wrath for the eldar renewed. Painful reminders of Nocturne during the Time of Trial, when fire rained from the sky and the earth cracked, flickered in his mind. He remembered their fear and the grim

resignation, all they had striven for, that everything they had created was about to end. Perhaps the tribes of Ibsen were not so different after all.

Ibsen again. He saw this world through a fresh lens, but why?

Ferrus was right: flesh *was* weak, but because he was strong, Vulkan was duty bound to protect them.

Whatever the cause of the frantic flight, the humans were at terrible risk. Entire families raced madly through the fading fog, screaming and wailing as a pervasive hysteria overtook them. Some even attacked the Army divisions in their desperation to escape, throwing rocks or beating them with their fists. None dared approach the legionaries for fear of the consequences.

And if they'd carried carbines and rifles instead of sticks and rocks?

The tribal tattoos, the apparent ease with which they'd been conquered, coupled with the eldar's total infiltration – in spite of his empathy, Vulkan began to wonder just how far from the Emperor's light the natives had fallen.

Through the smoky bloom of a grenade detonation, a mother and daughter emerged unscathed. Vulkan saw them running; they were just a few metres from the primarch's position, then he noticed the unexploded shell in their path. The girl-child was already screaming when a second grenade, fallen from a dead trooper's grasp, rolled up to the shell.

'Pyre Guard,' Vulkan roared. 'Shield them!'

The praetorians were catching up to the primarch but had reacted to the danger. Hot frag pierced the shell's casing and it erupted in a firestorm. Numeon and Varrun put their bodies between it and the cowering humans, crouching over them and wrapping their drake cloaks around them. The rain of fire and shrapnel vented to nothing without causing harm.

Numeon was shaking the dust from his helmet lenses when a tiny infant hand pressed against his plastron. He met the girl-child's curious gaze and was abruptly stunned.

Then they were gone, lost to the madness. The mother wasn't about to wait for another stray bullet or lurking shell to claim them. For Numeon, the moment of connection passed as swiftly as it had materialised.

Vulkan reached them quickly. 'Thank you, my sons.'

Both nodded, but Numeon's eyes went briefly to the fog the girl-child had vanished into.

'Protect them,' said Vulkan softly, following his equerry's gaze.

‘With our breath and blood, my primarch,’ Numeon replied. ‘With our breath and blood.’

Vulkan opened the comm-feed. ‘Ferrus, despite their agitation, these are innocents. Be mindful.’

‘Concern yourself with killing the enemy, not saving the natives, Vulkan.’ The Gorgon scowled, but his face softened before engaging the carnodons. ‘I’ll do what I can.’

A band of iron was tightening around the eldar’s defensive strongpoint. Vulkan knew if he continued to advance through the centre and Ferrus maintained his pace into the flank, their paths would meet. Together they would destroy the arch and end the eldar’s occupation of Ibsen. He only hoped it would not take an unconscionable loss of human life to achieve it.

As of yet, nothing had penetrated the psychic shield emanating from the coven of eldar witches surrounding the arch. Vulkan had also yet to see the female seer who’d almost defeated his Legion back in the jungle. She was the one the eldar looked to for leadership. Despatch her, and the aliens would be all but defeated. Victory was near. But something still gave the primarch pause. Above him, the jungle canopy was vast, dark and labyrinthine. Like his brothers, Vulkan had good instincts and harboured the sense that something watched him from those lofty arbours; something predatory. But his hesitation was not merely on account of that. Monsters he could kill easily enough. He’d been unsettled ever since speaking to Verace. The feeling was not one he was accustomed to, nor was the way the human had spoken to him, and yet the primarch had allowed it unchallenged. Verace was hiding something. It was only now, his thoughts purified by the anvil of war, that he realised it. Stern of face, Vulkan resolved to get answers from the remembrancer.

For now, such truths would have to wait.

Through the haze, a small band of eldar emerged to attack the primarch. Their armour was different from the others, azure plated and more martial in aspect. Crested helms, more ornate in design than those of their ranger brethren, concealed their faces and from within the folds of vermillion capes they drew long angular swords. A low hum presaged a crackle of energy fed down the blades.

Vulkan signalled to his praetorians.

Several eldar kindreds had been drawn to the primarch to try and slow or even stop the obvious threat, but his retinue were killing everything around

them.

‘Pyre Guard… Make it swift.’

Despatching the last of their enemies, they rushed ahead of Vulkan and into the eldar blademasters.

They weren’t alone. An ululating war cry announced a vast herd of raptors, powering through the dissipating fog. Energy lances dipping, they thundered towards Vulkan from the side. The blademasters, trading flashing blows with the Pyre Guard, had deliberately drawn off the praetorians.

‘Cunning,’ Vulkan muttered.

Facing off against the raptors, he hefted *Thunderhead*. ‘Those tiny spears cannot scratch me!’ he roared, and smashed the weapon into the ground.

The earth… *splintered* under the incredible hammer blow, cracking and fragmenting outwards in an ever-widening crater. Through sheer strength, Vulkan projected the bone-shattering force into a massive earth tremor that radiated lethally towards the charging raptors. Chunks of dispersing rock spewed up from the ground in a brittle spume of grit and shards. The raptors screeched and faltered, rearing madly as the quake hit. Riders toppled or were swept from their saddles by the earthy deluge. Staggered, all but annihilated, the front rankers disappeared in the mud storm and were crushed by the momentum of the stampede behind them.

Hindered by the dead and dying, the survivors could only cry out as Vulkan rose to his haunches and sprang into them.

The eldar and their saurians didn’t last long. By the time Vulkan was done with the grisly work, the Pyre Guard had slain the last of the blademasters. Ganne had a savage dent in his battleplate and Igataron had lost his helmet during the fight but otherwise the praetorians were intact.

‘We are losing ground,’ said Vulkan, seeing that Ferrus had killed the last of the giant carnodons.

Numeon gestured with his bloody halberd blade. ‘Scattered remnants are all that stand in our way, primarch.’

The equerry was right. The eldar were almost done. They’d fought tooth and nail against the Imperium, but with the destruction of the carnodons their resistance was at an end.

Only one feat remained before total victory was assured.

The monolithic arch stood unharmed behind the psychic shield, the coven of witches in place around it, their chanting uninterrupted since the battle began. Vulkan scoured their ranks, peering through the psychic energy veil,

but he could find no sign of the female seer. Yet, the sensation of being watched from overhead persisted.

‘She is here somewhere,’ he muttered, turning his gaze from the enshrouding jungle canopy to the battlefield. ‘The aliens have one last card to play before this is over.’

By now the other Salamanders were close at hand. Even the Army divisions were nearing the outer boundaries of the arch. Ferrus Manus wasn’t about to wait for reinforcement; he was advancing on the coven. Vulkan turned to his retinue. ‘Come on.’

Though spirited, the last of the eldar defenders broke against the brutal determination of Vulkan and his praetorians. Maimed and mangled aliens lay cold behind them. Memories of Breughar’s death at the cruel blades of the eldar witch surfaced inexplicably in the primarch’s mind, stoking the flames of his violence further. He barely saw his enemies any more. Their identities were lost to him, subsumed collectively into the face of the female slaver.

‘Primarch.’ It was Numeon who brought him back again, loyal, steadfast Numeon.

Vulkan gripped his armoured shoulder. ‘I’m sorry, my son, the fires of battle overcame me for a time.’

Numeon needed no explanation. ‘We are here.’

Luminous blossoms of energy flashed along the shield as the Iron Hands tried to crack it open. Bolter shells exploded impotently against the inviolable surface, whilst flamer bursts and heavier fire had similar effect.

Ferrus Manus swung *Forgebreaker* and the weapon rebounded harmlessly. Seeing Vulkan in his peripheral vision, he turned.

‘Any idea how we bring this thing down?’

Vulkan looked through the transparent psychic membrane. Despite the continuous chanting, the eldar witches were beginning to show signs of fatigue. Sweat veined their pale, eldritch faces and they grimaced with extreme concentration. Their strength was fading.

He hefted *Thunderhead*, enjoying the feel of the grip and the sense of its power. ‘I was going to try hitting it over and over again until it cracks.’

Ferrus grinned, a rare sight on one so serious and taciturn. ‘It’ll be like breaking in a new anvil.’

He was about to swing again when a deafening screech radiated from above, shaking the entire jungle canopy for kilometres around. The earth trembled as the screech became a throaty, bestial roar. In that moment, the

light died as if a cloud had obscured the sun. At the threshold to the arch, a dappled light had fallen on the shield, lending it a brilliant sheen – it disappeared in an instant as something vast and terrible eclipsed it.

A noisome stench had filled the air, making it heavy and thick. Looking up into the benighted sky, Vulkan wrinkled his nose. It emanated from a monster. The massive shadow descending towards them was shaped like a pterosaur only much, much bigger. Though it barely moved its membranous wings, the downdraft pushed the advancing Phaerians to their knees. Some stayed like that or sank further, huddling in foetal terror. The legionaries stood their ground with the primarchs, appraising the beast coldly through their helmet lenses. A bleat of reptilian voices snapped at the air as a flock of smaller pterosaurs appeared from behind the pteradon's incredible wingspan.

Ferrus Manus levelled his hammer at them.

'Scything rain!'

The Morlocks released a bolter storm. Whirling and shrieking, the pterosaurs were torn apart. Several stray bursts exploded against the thorny hide of the giant pteradon, which only maddened the beast further. It was gnarled and old, like some monster of myth made flesh. Myriad scars stitched its leathery torso and a vast horn, dark with age and blood stains, jutted from its bony snout. Talons, as long as the primarch was tall, curved from rough-hided toes. Umber-coloured scales, thicker than any battleplate ever forged, scalloped its back and limbs, while its long prehensile tail ended in an axe-headed barb.

Impressive as the monster was, Vulkan's attention was drawn by its rider.

'There you are…'

The female seer had bound this creature to her will and saddled it. Incredibly, she needed no hands to ride the monster and carried an eldritch staff in one and a glittering rune-blade in the other. Garbed for war, her intent was obvious as she glared at the two primarchs.

Vulkan removed his drake-helm, wanting to meet the monster eye to eye, and his face curled into a snarl. 'We must kill this thing, you and I.'

A primordial roar drowned out the Gorgon's reply, showering its enemies with hot saliva and reptile stink. Men quailed. Some soiled themselves and fled. The legionaries opened fire. Brass bolter shells erupted like fiery blooms across its ribbed belly. The beast rose to its haunches, wings splayed like some saurian angel, and then slammed the membranous tissue together in a thunderous collision. A deep throb raked the air, carried by the dull

boom resonating from the point of impact. A tempest was unleashed upon the Imperial forces. Phaerians and officers alike were flung back screaming, their innards pulped by the massive shock wave. They spun, doll-like, limbs flailing brokenly in the hurricane. Trees bowed, bent and ripped apart. Severed trunks and clumps of scattered foliage impaled tanks and flattened entire cohorts in the savage welter of debris. They resisted determinedly, but even the legionaries were sent sprawling, a thick and dirty cloud spilling after them.

Ferrus grit his teeth, standing his ground with Vulkan. His rage was written loudly upon his face.

‘I have no quarrel with that, brother.’

An arena lay before them, of ragged tree stumps and flattened jungle flora.

A gritty patina washed over their armour and surrounded the beast like a lowlying, earthy fog. It glared at them, expressing its ancient hate and malice, dwarfing the primarchs utterly.

‘Try again, monster,’ said Vulkan, dropping his voice to a predatory rumble.

He heard a low *whomp* of displaced air and registered a blur of sudden movement in time to slam into Ferrus Manus and bear him down. A scaled, gnarled mass whipped overhead as the pteradon’s axe-bladed tail narrowly missed the Gorgon’s exposed neck.

Vulkan was quickly up on his feet and moving. ‘Don’t lose your head, brother.’

Ferrus scowled. ‘Worry about your own. It’ll take more than that to cut my flesh.’ He was moving too, making for the pteradon’s blindside to flank it.

Its monstrous size and strength were formidable advantages, but with its enemies splitting up it couldn’t bring them to bear against both. Emitting a reverberant screech, it went after Vulkan.

Hunting monsters was second nature to the primarch of the Salamanders. Nocturne was lair to many scaled and chitinous horrors. As a boy, Vulkan had slain them all. Even the drake he wore as his mantle was huge, but this… this was a *behemoth*.

He lost sight of Ferrus behind the pteradon’s bulk, but stayed near to the beast to deny it its greater reach. The brackish reptile stench was potent close up. Mortal men would have gagged on its foul aroma but Vulkan had ranged

the steppes of Mount Deathfire and endured its sulphurous vapours. This was nothing to him.

A hot chain of sparks flew off the primarch's armour as the monster caught him with its talons, before he turned and smashed *Thunderhead* into its flank. Its scales buckled and snapped. The cracks in the monster's natural armour filled with blood, and a shriek of pain tore from its throat. A heady coppery scent dirtied the air further, and Vulkan knew he'd hurt it.

Keep moving. It was a mantra in the primarch's head as he chased along the pteradon's flank. *Stop and we die*.

No man could hope to face such a monster, let alone fight it. Primarchs were more than men, more than Space Marines. They were like unto gods but even gods could fall.

As if hearing his thoughts, the monster came again. It lunged, and Vulkan narrowly avoided the razor teeth. He came up for a retaliatory strike, but the beast snapped at him again and he dropped his shoulder to dodge. It used its bulk to slam into him and Vulkan staggered before edging back.

Teeth as long as chainblades and drooling with saliva loomed in the primarch's eye line.

He swung *Thunderhead* in a narrow arc to loosen his wrist, readying to crush the monster's neck, when a clutch of roots spewed from the earth to trap him.

Vulkan snarled.

The witch was trying to even the odds with sorcery.

He tore his arm free but further serpentine bonds coiled around it, pinning him. Vulkan roared and the beast roared with him, sensing its meal was close. Widening its chasmal jaw, the pteradon was about to bite off Vulkan's head when it reared up in sudden agony. Swinging its leathery neck to peer over its shoulder, it screeched at a second assailant.

'Like I said, worry about yourself, brother…'

Ferrus Manus appeared from behind the monster, seen through the gaps between its massive limbs. He'd shattered a bone framing its wing membrane and leapt clear as it slashed at him belatedly with its tail. Shedding the root bonds, Vulkan punched *Thunderhead* into the beast's unprotected belly. Muscles ruptured and bones cracked, eliciting another shrill of bestial agony. A swipe of the pteradon's bladed wing claw prevented his follow up attack and forced him to retreat, while Ferrus Manus was kept at bay with stabbing thrusts of the monster's barbed tail.

Venturing in close again, Vulkan took a chunk of scale from its back. The two-handed blow left gore drooling between the knots and scars of its body like before, and he knew its formidable strength was ebbing.

‘We’re close!’ he yelled.

Ferrus charged in to shatter the monster’s standing leg. It screeched, stumbling in pain. A line of blood jetted across Vulkan’s plastron as he caved in a portion of the pteradon’s snout. It reeled before Ferrus sheared through one of its wings, leaving the membranous tissue ragged. Between them, the savage primarchs were tearing the monster apart. A bleat of panic escaped its throat, gurgling with the blood in its nasal cavity and mouth. The pteradon suddenly realised who was predator and who was prey.

It tried to flee but the primarchs were relentless, battering its wings with continuous blows and pounding its body like it was a carcass for tenderising. A flash from above presaged a jolt of lightning that struck Ferrus in the chest, winding him. He staggered and the monster was allowed to rise. Even though it was wounded, the hard beats of its wings were achieving loft. Another psychic bolt jagged down at Vulkan, but he evaded it and seized the pteradon’s flank.

‘There’s no escape,’ he muttered, gripping the edges of the monster’s scales and using them like handholds as the ground steadily fell away and he was borne upwards.

‘*Vulkan!*’

Ferrus’s shout was devoured by the wind rushing into Vulkan’s ears. It whipped around him, whistling and screeching with the speed of the monster’s ascent. Battered by the rigours of the elements, Vulkan gritted his teeth and clung on. Amidst the tempest engulfing him, he heard the tolling of metal on metal. The anvil beckoned.

Crushed against the beast’s coarse flank, the world around him devolving into a shrieking blur, he knew he had to rise. When he pulled his hand free, the fingers of his gauntlet were rimed with gore from where he’d been digging in. Grabbing another armoured scale, Vulkan climbed. It was slow. Every moment held the threat of him losing his grip and being cast into arboreal oblivion below. Split branches fell like rain as they reached the forest canopy and surged through it. They scraped like claws across his face and for a few seconds he was blinded, his vision filled by parting foliage. Vulkan held on.

The striking of the anvil tolled in his ears.

After they’d breached the jungle roof, he was able to claw a little further up the pteradon’s body and reached the bony nub of its foreleg. He fought the pressing sense of disorientation as all visual and auditory markers disappeared in the maddened ascent. Heavy wing beats throbbed painfully in his ears as direction lost all meaning. There was only the need to hang on and the will to climb. The beast flew higher.

The sun still burned the sky, but it was wreathed in cloud as the monster rose, ever further into the heavens. It couldn’t shake him. It barely had the strength to climb, so Vulkan only needed to bear the raging wind that pulled at his body and tugged at his fingers.

He dug in and ate up the slow metres to his prey. His mind retreated back to the lava chasm all those many long years ago.

It was another life.

Reaching the muscular join between the monster’s wings, he found his enemy.

‘Witch!’ he called, bellowing to be heard.

She turned, looking over her shoulder. Her eyes flickered with psychic fire, and a bolt arrowed past Vulkan’s face.

‘You’ll need to do better than that,’ he shouted.

She angled her staff at the primarch, releasing a lightning storm that scorched his armour and burned a scar down his cheek. Vulkan grimaced, but advanced undaunted. Each punishing handhold brought him closer than the last. Underneath his body, he could sense the monster tiring, hear its laboured breathing and feel its shuddering muscles as they reached the end of their endurance.

Unable to climb any further, the pteradon pulled up and levelled out, enabling the eldar seer to leave her saddle and stand upon its vast, muscular back. She confronted the primarch, feeding power into the blade of her sword.

Vulkan was on his feet. He drew his hammer, slowly and purposefully to allow the full import of what fighting one of the Emperor’s sons meant to settle on the seer.

‘Surrender now and it will be swift,’ he promised.

She ran at him instead.

Vulkan charged.

The primarch’s footing was uneven across the monster’s back but he reached the seer without stumbling. The rune-blade whickered like a viper’s

tongue, raking *Thunderhead's* thick haft. She struck again, scoring a pectoral armour plate. Vulkan swung but she sprang away from the death blow, impossibly agile, and landed perfectly on the pteradon's back. She lunged, aiming for Vulkan's heart. The thrust penetrated the primarch's guard but was turned aside by his armour. A crack presaged the breaking of her sword. The seer gasped at the psychic backlash, recoiling instinctively as the energy tore at her, clutching at a blackened arm.

Seizing her throat in his gauntleted fist, Vulkan bore the eldar witch down.

'This world belongs to the Imperium.'

She'd lost her staff, dropped over the edge of the monster, and her sword was a smoking hilt she'd also cast aside. All that remained was her defiance.

She spat over Vulkan's armour, and there was blood mixed in with the phlegm.

'Barbarian!' The Imperial dialect sounded crude on her lyrical tongue. 'You don't know what you've done…' Her pale lips were flecked crimson and the vigour in her eyes was fading. 'If you destroy it, you will doom this world more than you have already.'

Vulkan loosened his grip and was rewarded with treachery. A burst of psychic fire flared between them and he withdrew, letting the seer go. A second blast threw him off his feet and he was scrambling to hold on.

Panicking, the seer mounted the saddle and drove the pteradon into a suicidal dive. With a vertiginous lurch, Vulkan was falling and he reached out desperately for something to hold on to as he pitched over the pteradon's side.

She was chanting. Her lilting refrain unleashed spear-thick barbs from the forest below. Vulkan narrowed his eyes and he dug his fingers between the plated scales. Stomach flat against the pteradon's gelid hide, he weathered the debris storm that was suddenly bombarding him.

Descent was swift. The strain of it pressed against the primarch's body like an armoured fist slowly clenching. The beast was almost done, plunging like a stone. It penetrated the broken leaf canopy as if breaching the atmosphere of a foreign world, but there was no fire, no aura of re-entry heat, just wind and the ground rushing to meet them. As the monster plummeted, Vulkan's grip loosened. Inertia was dragging the scales he was clinging to, threatening to rip apart the sinews holding them together and tear them off.

The earth loomed, a flat and uncompromising expanse that only required gravity to pulp flesh and shatter bones. It seemed the seer was intent on killing them both. Vulkan hung on, hoping his superhuman endurance would see him through. Thirty metres from impact, the pteradon's survival instincts took over. Emitting a plaintive yelp, it tried to pull out of the lethal dive but was too late. Twisting its massive body in vain, the monster slammed into the earth.

Darkness fell as a huge pall of dirt was thrown into the air by the impact. Ripped free from the monster's back, Vulkan was thrown clear, but came quickly to his feet. He wasn't far from where the pteradon had ditched. The beast had borne the brunt of the fall and cracks emanated from its broken carcass. Its wings were tattered strips. The fleshy membrane was tougher than flak armour but its shattered bones had sheared through it like blades. Thick fluid drooled down its crooked snout, and its neck was wrenched at an unnatural angle. Vulkan ran to it, knowing the seer might also have survived the fall.

She was struggling from the wreckage, obscured by a slowly settling dust cloud. Blood painted her robes and her leg was clearly broken. She glared at the primarch as he approached her, snarling through red-rimed teeth. Summoning a nimbus of lightning, she raised her palm in a final defiant effort to kill him. Vulkan swung his hammer before the nascent psychic storm could manifest and took her head from her shoulders.

Blood was still spewing from the ragged neck cavity when the body finally caught up to the mind and the decapitated seer fell to her knees, then onto her front. She was quickly surrounded by a gory pool of her own spilling vital fluids.

Ferrus Manus quietly regarded the alien head that came to rest at his feet.

'It's over, brother,' Vulkan told him.

The Gorgon was pensive as he looked up.

'Victory.'

Legion and Army divisions patrolled the battlefield, searching for the enemy. Wounded eldar were quickly silenced, while Imperial casualties were either recovered or granted mercy if their injuries were too severe. It was dirty work, war work, but it was necessary. Small bands of natives still roamed the killing ground, lost and seemingly afraid. Efforts to herd them together for medical attention and processing were met with hostility at first but gradually the tribespeople had submitted peacefully.

The death of the seer had effectively ended the resistance. The eldar were utterly broken, and would not return. Execution squads had already been dispatched into the jungle to hunt down the last of them. Ferrus Manus had done the same before leaving the desert and there was no doubt Mortarion had expunged all hostiles from the ice plains.

Army discipline-masters had the Phaerians set fires in the rotting carcass of the pteradon. Such a mass of meat and bone would take time to burn. Vulkan frowned as he watched the bolder, more ebullient troopers make mock triumphal gestures as they posed on top of its corpse. It was undignified. Disrespectful.

‘What was it like?’ asked Ferrus Manus. The primarch of the Iron Hands was standing at his shoulder, surveying the aftermath.

Vulkan turned to face him. ‘What was what like?’

‘Riding on the back of that beast. I never expected one of the Eighteenth to be so impulsive.’ He laughed to show he meant no harm.

Vulkan smiled. He still hurt too much to laugh. ‘Remind me never to do anything like that again.’

He winced when the Gorgon slapped his back. ‘Glory hound.’

With the achievement of victory, Ferrus’s mood had warmed. His strength and courage were reborn in his eyes, and his Legion had helped deliver One-Five-Four Four to compliance. It was a good day.

They were standing before the arch. The psychic shield was down. Following its destruction, the eldar witch coven had burned violently like candles over-fuelled with oxygen. They resembled little more than charred corpses crumpled in front of the encircling menhirs now.

Ferrus nudged at the ash with his boot. ‘Thus is the fate of all foes.’

‘They hung on long enough,’ said Vulkan. He focused on one, a male whose skeletal hands were curled into claws. The warlock had raged at the end. ‘I still can’t fathom why they defended this place so vehemently.’

‘Who can guess at the mores of aliens?’ Ferrus sounded dismissive. ‘A better question is what is to be done about that.’ He gestured to the massive arch, now denuded of its psychic defences. ‘Unless you want to leap from a Stormbird again and shatter it?’

The Gorgon’s humour was lost on Vulkan. He was intent on the arch. A gate, Verace had supposed.

But leading to where?

‘I think destroying it out of hand would be a mistake. At least until we know its purpose.’

Ferrus’s levity frosted over and he grew serious. ‘It *has* to be destroyed.’

Vulkan was stern. ‘We may unleash a greater evil.’

‘What has got into you, brother?’ asked Ferrus, his eyes narrowing.

‘Something…’ Vulkan shook his head. When his gaze went to the plinth beneath the arch, he saw a familiar face. ‘What is *he* doing over there?’

Ferrus grabbed Vulkan’s arm to stop him from heading to the plinth. ‘We set charges and demolish this thing.’

Vulkan pulled free and returned his brother’s glare. ‘Indulge me, Ferrus.’

The Gorgon scowled but let go.

When Vulkan reached the plinth it was deserted. Verace was gone. The primarch walked the entire vast perimeter. There was no sign of the remembrancer, but he did notice a disparity in the runic pattern around the plinth.

He summoned the Pyre Guard, drawing his hammer.

‘Do you see that?’ he asked his equerry.

Numeon pulled out his halberd. ‘I do, primarch. An opening.’

It was little more than a crack, an interruption in the runic formation around the plinth, but definitely a doorway.

The equerry nodded to Ganne and Igataron. ‘Open it.’

The two praetorians sheathed their blades and pressed their shoulders against the plinth wall. Leodrakk and Skatar’var took up posts either side with weapons ready. If anything came from within, it would die a quick death should it choose to attack. The doorway was a rune-carved slab, tall enough to accommodate the legionaries and fashioned from the same stone as the arch. It ground inwards, stone scraping stone, revealing a shallow stairway leading into a chamber sunken *below* the arch.

‘Lower your blades,’ said Vulkan.

The praetorians obeyed. Numeon and Varrun were the last to relent, and eyed the shadows inside the plinth warily.

‘What further horrors await us?’ asked the equerry.

Vulkan was reminded of the small chamber beneath the forge, the one under the anvil that N’bel had sealed at his request.

‘There is but one way to find out,’ said the primarch. ‘I lead.’

Then he stepped through the doorway and was immersed in darkness.

‘I have so many questions.’

‘Answers will come, but some only in time. Many you’ll have to discover for yourself.’

They sat together, overlooking the Pyre Desert as the sun set over its hostile sands. It was a barren, harsh land but it was home. Vulkan had believed it so, anyway. Everything he had learned in the last few hours had changed that, or at least it had changed how he thought of it.

He turned to regard the face of the Outlander. It was at once old, yet young; wise, yet innocent. There was benevolence in his tone that suggested understanding, but also a weight to his bearing that was either caused by sorrow or the burden of some great knowledge. Fire blazed in his eyes, but not like Vulkan’s; this was a deeper furnace, a flame of will that would drive a great labour to fruition.

How much of this Vulkan perceived on his own and how much the Outlander conveyed to him, he didn’t know. He only knew he was bound for the stars and a life beyond Nocturne. As the hot wind roiling off the desert plain warmed his face and the scent of ash carried on the breeze, he knew he would miss his world deeply. It saddened him to think of leaving it.

‘And I have brothers?’ he asked.

The Outlander nodded. ‘You have many. Several are already waiting for you, as eager as I am for your return.’

That pleased Vulkan. Despite the unconditional acceptance of the Nocturne people, he had always felt alone. To know there were others of his true flesh and blood in the galaxy, and that he’d soon be reunited with them, was comforting.

‘What will happen to my father – N’bel, I mean?’

‘You need have no fear. N’bel and all of your people will be safe.’

‘How, if I am not here to protect them?’

The Outlander smiled, and the warmth of it chased away Vulkan’s anxiety.

‘Your destiny is a great one, Vulkan. You are my son, and you will join me and your brothers on a crusade that will unite the galaxy and make it safe for all of mankind.’ His face fell suddenly to melancholy, and Vulkan felt a sympathetic ache in his heart at the sight of it. ‘But you must leave Nocturne, and for that I am truly sorry. I need you, Vulkan, more than you know, more perhaps than you’ll ever know. Of all my sons, you are the most compassionate. Your nobility of spirit and humility will keep your disparate siblings grounded. You are the earth, Vulkan, its fire and solidity.’

‘I don’t know what you’re asking me to do, father.’ It was strange to call the Outlander that – a man, or being, he barely knew and yet felt an undeniable connection to.

‘You will. It pains me, but I will have to leave you all when you need me the most, though I’ll try to watch over you when I can.’

‘I wish I knew what this all meant and what I am supposed to become.’ Vulkan raised his face to the sky and watched the burning sun as it scorched all of Nocturne beneath its pitiless rays.

‘You will, Vulkan. I promise you, when the time comes, you will know.’

A golden light suffused the Outlander, radiating from under his skin, as he cast off his disguise and revealed the truth…

Harboured beneath the plinth was a vast and echoing catacomb. Something drew Vulkan downwards as he descended the steps in a daze. What he found when he reached the bottom made his fiery Nocturnean blood run cold.

‘What is this place?’ hissed Numeon.

Strange sigils were daubed on the walls, alien in origin, and there were shrines sunk into alcoves dedicated to aberrant deities. A procession of crude statues, long-limbed and androgynous of gender, lined the edges of a subterranean passageway that fed deeper into the complex. At the end of it, shadows were moving in the reflected glow of ritual firelight.

‘A temple.’ Vulkan’s voice was deep and thick with anger. He drew a gladius.

A susurrus of scraping metal followed as the Pyre Guard each unsheathed their own short swords. None would muddy their chosen weapons on filthy, graven priests.

‘Tread quietly and in my wake,’ Vulkan told them and began to move towards the flickering light.

A sick feeling took hold in the primarch’s stomach, something that had been growing ever since the boy-child from the jungle had confronted him. Insidious talons had sunk deep into him and were twisting at his resolve. He remembered the thoughts he’d had earlier when he’d considered what must have transpired on Ibsen before the Imperium had arrived to enlighten it.

How far from the Emperor’s light had the natives had fallen?

Vulkan reached the edge of another chamber. It was roughly circular, crudely hewn from the earth and packed with clay. There, sigils were drawn upon the wall like before and totems placed at specific cardinal points around the room. In the centre was a ring of fire. A cadre of robed figures

cavorted around it, chanting. It was the same lyrical mantras as sung by the female seer. Within the ritual circle, partly hidden by the rising flames, was a figure tied to a wooden column that supported the chamber roof. Runic symbols, alien symbols, were notched upon its surface too.

As Vulkan stepped through into the light, one of the priests turned. He was wearing a mask of some wretched eldar deity and a rune was cut into the flesh of his bared chest. Upon seeing the primarch, a shadowed giant with the glowing eyes of a daemon, the priest cried out and the chanting stopped abruptly. Screaming took over, and the drawing of jagged blades. It would be like trying to fight a Terran bear with a pin. Realising their only escape route was blocked, the worshippers fled to the back of the cavern and cowered. Some spat curses, but kept their daggers low so as not to provoke.

Numeon stalked forwards, a thin snarl escaping his lips.

‘Wait!’ Vulkan stopped him. The praetorians looked ready to kill the humans out of hand, but stood down and simply glowered at them.

‘They never wanted to be saved,’ said Vulkan, partly to himself. ‘They were *already* saved, but not by us–’

‘Primarch, they are no better than the eldar,’ snapped Numeon, still eager and in the slaying mood.

‘I have been so blind.’

Sheathing his gladius, for there was no real danger here, Vulkan approached the ring of fire. What he saw tied up against the column within made him stagger.

There was a rattle of armour as the Pyre Guard went to their lord, but Vulkan’s upraised hand stilled them.

‘I’m all right.’ His voice was barely above a whisper. His gaze was drawn utterly to the figure, as the cavern seemed to shrink around him, pressing against the primarch with the weight of destiny.

It was the eyes that he recognised, for the body had long since shrivelled to desiccation and the vicissitudes of time had ravaged it.

He would remember those eyes, dagger-thin and filled with a sickening ennui.

A debilitating pain welled up in Vulkan’s chest as old memories came back like reopened wounds.

‘Breughar…’

Thoughts of the dead metal-shaper brought tears of fire to the primarch’s eyes as he realised who he stood face-to-face with. She recognised him too,

but her corpse-like face was incapable of expression.

‘The slaver-witch.’

Suddenly, the battle in front of the gates of Hesiod did not seem so long ago.

The dusk-wraiths had been here, to Ibsen, just as they had tormented Nocturne all those centuries before. The horrifying truth of it fell hard and pitilessly. The humans worshipped the eldar because *they* were their saviours. They had saved them from the slavers, from their own dark cousins. And now they had tortured this one for some fell purpose, perhaps to ward off future incursions, or maybe it was to remove the terror from the myth. Either way, Vulkan’s rage rose to the surface like a volcano moments from eruption.

He turned his back on the witch for the last time.

‘This world is lost.’ He felt numb, almost stupefied. His breathing came quick and angry. His teeth clenched and so did his fists. He mumbled the command, ‘No one leaves this place alive,’ before becoming loud enough to cause a panic in the priests. ‘Slay them all.’

Heart heavy, Vulkan walked away and left the sounds of slaughter behind him.

My eyes are open, father.

He knew what he must do.

On the hills overlooking the great runic arch, Vulkan watched the fires burn. Heavy landers were breaching the upper atmosphere in the distance, conveying the tens of thousands of Army divisions bound for the next warzone. Below, the conflagration was slowly consuming the entire jungle. Everything burned. This world would be razed to ash, its mineral seams mined to extinction and put to use for the furtherance of the Great Crusade. Ibsen had become a death world, it had become Nocturne.

‘I sanctioned murder of unarmed men today,’ Vulkan said to the heat haze rippling off the blaze. It was incandescent, beautiful, terrible.

Ferrus Manus answered. ‘Better to cleanse this place and begin anew than leave behind a canker to fester.’ The Gorgon had come to bid him farewell until the next campaign. His Morlocks and the rest of his Iron Hands were embarked; only the primarch and Gabriel Santar remained.

‘I know that, brother.’ There was resignation in his tone.

‘You risk your men and you risk your life; you cannot save everyone, Vulkan.’

‘The nodes we collapsed, they were keeping that thing dormant.’ He gestured to the arch. ‘It’s a gateway. I’ve seen them before, long ago. They lead to the endless darkness where only horror and torture await. I have done this, Ferrus. I have condemned this planet to the same fate as my own. How am I supposed to live with that knowledge?’

‘More worlds will burn before this crusade is done – innocent worlds. The galaxy is at stake, brother. What is one planet compared to that?’ Ferrus snapped, betraying his anger and frustration at something he didn’t truly understand. ‘Your compassion is a weakness. It will end up killing you.’

Ferrus stalked away, his Stormbird ready to launch, and Vulkan was left to contemplate the raging flames.

He was not alone for long.

‘Primarch, the ships are leaving.’ It was Numeon, come to summon his liege-lord.

Vulkan turned to the equerry. ‘Did you find the remembrancer as I asked?’

Numeon stepped aside, revealing a robed and erudite-looking figure. ‘I did, my lord.’

Vulkan frowned. ‘That is not Verace.’

‘Primarch?’

‘That is not Verace,’ Vulkan repeated.

The remembrancer bowed nervously. ‘My name is Glaivarzel, my lord. You offered to relate your life’s origins to me so that I might capture it for posterity.’

Vulkan ignored the human, his attention on Numeon.

‘Bring me Remembrancer Verace. I will speak to this man later.’

Numeon hastily dismissed Glaivarzel, but returned with a confused expression.

‘Primarch, I don’t know of whom you speak.’

‘Are you trying to vex me, equerry?’ Vulkan grew angry. ‘Bring me the other–’ He stopped. There was utterly no recognition in Numeon’s eyes, none at all.

A stranger’s words came back to him.

I’ll try to watch over you when I can.

All the fury in him drained away. Vulkan held Numeon’s shoulders as father to son.

‘I’m sorry. Ready the ship. I’ll be there in a few moments.’

If Numeon understood what had just happened, he didn’t show it. He merely nodded and went to his duty.

Vulkan was left alone with his thoughts.

An ocean of fire was washing across the jungle. Its trees would blacken and die, its leaves would wither to dust. An arid plain would rise from a fertile land and a race would be forsaken to memory. He imagined the settlers that would come after them, the burgeoning Imperial landers brimming with people. It was a new world for the expeditionaries to inhabit, for pioneers to map and colonise. World One-Five-Four Four. It would not be easy for them.

The dusk-wraiths would return, Vulkan was sure, but the colonists would take up arms and fight them just as his people had. It would be a hard life, but a good and noble one. N’bel had taught him the importance of that.

As a primarch, he had come to Ibsen with his humours out of balance, his purpose blunted. He had wanted to save these people and though he could not, Vulkan had rediscovered a part of himself he thought lost. Compassion was seen as a flaw by some. Certainly, Ferrus Manus thought so. But an Outlander had opened Vulkan’s eyes and shown him it was his greatest strength.

‘I will name this place Caldera,’ he said aloud, and vowed he would protect it with the same ferocity as Nocturne. It would not become just another compliant world, a number without a heart. Vulkan had taken much but he could give it that at least.

The flames of the conflagration were rising. Thick clouds of ash scurried across the reddish sky at the eve of a fresh Hell-dawn. Vulkan turned his face to the heavens and met the glare of the baleful sun. A Promethean sun.

The jungle resounds to bloody battle…

SCORCHED EARTH

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The XVIII Legion, 'Salamanders'

R_{A'STAN}, Legionary

U_{SABIUS}, Legionary

The X Legion, 'Iron Hands'

E_{RASMUS} R_{UUMAN}, Ironwrought

I_{SHMAL} S_{ULNAR}, Commander

T_{ARKAN}, Legionary sniper

The XIX Legion, 'Raven Guard'

M_{ORVAX} H_{AUKSPEER}, Apothecary

The III Legion, 'Emperor's Children'

L_{ORIMARR}, Legionary

Despair is the moment when all hope dies and the inevitability of ending crashes in like the sword blow aimed squarely at your neck or the hot muzzle of a gun pressed to your temple. If you are fortunate, if mercy is favouring you, then your despair will be quick. But not all of us are fortunate; for some the realisation of despair is a slow creep, an eroding denial like flesh giving way to age or metal to rust. It hollows you out, cuts away everything that you were and replaces it with blackness. This I had heard.

Never in my life had I given in to despair. Even during the trials on my world of fire and ash, when the heat was scalding my back like a blacksmith's tongs or the sa'hrk were at my heels, eager to taste my flesh, never did I believe I would not succeed. I always had hope.

Back then I was mere flesh and blood, just a man whose bones would not re-knit in minutes, whose blood would not clot in seconds, whose skin was not hard like onyx and coloured the very same. Now I have eyes of fire to match the red world that gave birth to me, once as a mortal then again during my apotheosis as a legionary. I don't remember my name from before. I am called Ra'stan now by my brothers, or captain by my men. That rank holds almost no meaning now because there are no warriors left to refer to me by that nomenclature, so I am just Ra'stan. Not a human, but a super-man; transhuman in every sense with all the advantages my father gave me.

As a man, I had never given in to despair. As a man, I always believed I would succeed. I had hope.

I am a Space Marine of the XVIII Legion Salamanders, one of the Fireborn and true son of Vulkan, and for the first time in my life I know despair.

An explosion lit up the distant ridge line, illuminating a large dark plain. Stark magnesium-white turned our deep green armour into grey monochrome, though our eyes still blazed like forge fires. Usabius and I ducked instinctively and braced for the seismic tremor that followed, even though the ugly flare from incendiaries had become commonplace in the last few days. Or was it weeks, even months? Time had ceased to be relevant when we realised quickly that our sands in the hourglass were borrowed.

Those with a more twisted outlook might say we had been lucky, fortunate to have any time afforded to us at all, but they would be wrong. We live in hell, a hell of black sand where nothing is as it should be and all has come to madness. A warrior, even one as steeled as a Space Marine, could lose his mind in such turpitude. There are many words in many cultures for such a state of being. I have heard sons of Russ call it *Ragnarok*. Others know it as Armageddon. We Salamanders call it the *Tempus Infernus* or Time of Fire, but I suspect many will later just refer to it as heresy.

As of this moment, we knew it as Isstvan.

We set down our burden as we went to ground, scrambling behind rocks and the burned-out wrecks of drop-ships. These military leviathans could carry entire battle companies and their convoys of support vehicles, serfs, Mechanicum adepts and Dreadnoughts. Now they were downed, their guts ripped open to fester in the smoke-thronged air, festooned with bodies, charnel houses in every aspect. The dirty little patch of earth where we squatted was also a wrecker’s yard… Land Raiders, Rhino armoured personnel carriers and the skeletal remains of speeders littered our position along with the massive drop-ships like an iron graveyard.

Even with a drop-ship’s coal-black fuselage between us and our hunters, the firefight still far off and explosions distant, I did not feel safe. Nowhere was safe and eventually we too would be swept up in the tide of anger that

had descended on the Urgall Depression like a cloud in which fratricide on a grand scale was the only constant.

‘Keep him still,’ I said to Usabius, knowing my brother would not allow our burden to reveal our position.

Even in the wastes, far from the Urgall Hills, there was still a lot of black sand between us and solace.

I glanced back and saw him muttering something reassuring to the half-dead Raven Guard we were carrying. The drop-ship against which we were hiding had belonged to his Legion. Black on black, the scorch marks from the terrible fires that had eventually destroyed it had obliterated the white corvidae device on both the wing and the torn-up hull.

Edging around the nose of the drop-ship, which was half-buried in dark sand, I tried to gauge the level of threat beyond our fragile sanctuary.

I saw a pack of eight warriors in sea-green armour, black trim around the edges of their battleplate, carrying a mixture of power mauls, glaives and chainblades. The chain weapons were burring noisily, vying with the dark laughter of these killers and the mechanised barking of their beasts.

‘A death-squad,’ I told Usabius, who did not respond. ‘With mastiffs. No blind-hunters.’

I almost felt my brother relax at the last remark.

I felt far from sanguine, but then I could see what was happening beyond the nose of the drop-ship in a shallow, ellipse-shaped gully.

Three other warriors, two in armour of coal-black, a white hand emblazoned on their left pauldrons, and one in darker armour still with his battle-helm torn off to reveal a chalk-white face beneath, were being encircled by the death-squad.

I saw a second group of hunters, six this time. Same damn Legion, bolters loose. One carried a missile tube, the cause of the earlier explosion that had frozen us in place.

After a few seconds of charged silence, Usabius asked, ‘Can we move?’

I shook my head, motioned for him to stay still.

No point in letting Usabius see this. He would want to fight, to try and save the warriors in the hunters’ deadly trap. It was a death sentence and I had not rescued him from mortal peril once only for him to cast away his life meaninglessly. I wanted to save them too, but nailed my resolve through my feet so I would not move.

So, as the jaws of the trap closed and the hunters advanced, I waited and watched. And hated myself for that.

They were badly injured, the three in black. But two attacked anyway, thunder hammers swinging. I flinched involuntarily as the trio of bolt rounds sounded like a parade drum, a staccato one-two one and the Iron Hands jerking to their deadly tattoo.

One fell, chest ruptured, arm severed at the shoulder. I saw sparks, thrashing serpentine wires severed from their connections in a bionic arm. The hand came away at the wrist, sawn off in the kinetic impact of bolter shells.

My muscles felt tight and heavy like slabs of lead. I realised I was tensing them. Blood pounded hard against the inside of my skull, my enhanced metabolism recognising the electrical signals my brain was sending it and preparing for combat. I calmed down, reasserted my order to Usabius to hold after having heard the shots and moving up a fraction.

Be still, I willed him as I saw the second Iron Hand die. He was impaled by a chainblade, then bludgeoned to death. His scream was a mechanised blurt of pseudo-static that chilled my lava-hot blood.

‘Brother…’ Usabius urged from behind me. He spoke the word through clenched teeth and made it sound like an imprecation.

The last slipped the net, afforded an escape route by the sacrifice of the others. I saw him barrel two of his would-be torturers out of the way, spearing the guts from one and slashing off half the face from another with his claws.

Sons of Horus, mewing and cursing as they choked on their own blood… It gave me more satisfaction than it should have, and for a moment I balked at my own transformation.

As the Raven Guard took flight, I dared to hope and wanted to clench my fist in triumph and defiance.

I waited and watched as muzzle flares lit up the darkness, the scurrying and shouting that followed as the hunters tried to reset their trap.

Then came the chill in my blood, renewed by an avian cry of anguish. Someone was dying somewhere ahead of us. A few minutes later, I saw the Raven Guard raised up on an eight-pointed cross, snatches of his crucifixion revealed to me through flashes of incendiary and the dull lambent glow of funerary pyres. On the horizon line, I saw a long chain of those burning hillocks, bodies for fuel; the bodies of my brothers. They were large, some

even dwarfed the Urgall Hills. One, I think, was comprised entirely of skulls but I looked away as a strange sense of wrath and sickness came upon me. Somewhere up there was his fortress, where the Emperor's fallen son had plotted his deception and seen it enacted in full.

I averted my gaze, tried to shut out the sound of the Raven Guard's torment and saw something crawling towards me. Arachnid, spastic motions made it hard to identify immediately. I recoiled when I realised it was a hand, the same bionic ripped from one of the dead warriors during his execution. Without thinking I crushed it beneath my boot, horrified at the very sight, and looked up.

The death-squad lingered, their silhouettes bulky and spiked against the roaring pyres behind them, their hounds snarling at the leash. They were torturing, and relishing the act. I knew pain, I had inflicted it upon my enemies, received it back in turn. I had even visited it upon captured foes in order to learn of their battle plans or ascertain mission objectives when none were obvious. It left a taste like the dust of the Scorian Plain in my mouth, but this was something else. My deeds, however repugnant to me, had purpose. The cruelty the death-squad were subjecting the crucified legionary to was animalistic, debased. I had to fight not to reach for my bolter and put the poor bastard out of his misery. But to do so would reveal our position, then we would be the ones upon the eight-pointed cross.

We would have to stay and listen to them have their sport. I could feel Usabius's anger like an electric tang in the air behind me. I held out my hand in warning. 'Wait.'

'This one might not last,' he snarled, anger bubbling over, referring to our own wounded Raven Guard.

We were hunting too, for survivors, for survival, anything that would fill the glass with more grains and allow us that time to hit back, for revenge, because we would never understand why. For Usabius and me, there was also something else, someone else we were looking for. We had been close when we heard the moaning from inside the drop-ship and found the son of Corax bathed in his own blood. He did not moan any more, but was largely still and quiet. This bothered me more than I let on to Usabius, because to admit that our efforts had been futile in rescuing him would also force us to admit other truths which we were not yet ready to face.

I had not seen Ferrus Manus die.

I think I felt his death through the rage and anguish of his sons. The Iron Hands were normally so stoic, as mechanised with their emotions as they were with the slow metal colonisation of their bodies.

The flesh is weak, so went their Legion mantra.

All of us were weak. Weak when faced with treachery beyond countenance when the guns at our backs that were meant to protect us turned…

I was there on the left flank. An entire Legion arrayed for battle, led ingloriously by our father into a fight we did not want but could not avoid. Death came first, for them and us. Horus had leashed three primarchs to his cause, as well as his own devoted Legion. Perhaps we should have known when his cult of personality overtook him, when the title of Warmaster changed to warmonger and became the right of a disaffected son, not an honour bestowed by a grateful father. He changed their name, no longer content to share the lupine aspect with a more obviously feral and deserving brother Legion, and made them all his sons in identity as well as blood.

Perhaps then we should have known, but even if those signs were there, we could not have divined what happened next.

We had lost a lot, killed our brothers in what felt like senseless slaughter. It paled to what followed as we were retreating back towards the dropsite, licking our wounds and consolidating our forces so that others could resume the fight in our stead. Banners of the Hydra and the Iron were behind us, ready reinforcements and the very real evidence that Horus had erred. But the unthinkable became reality: seven Legions had defied the Emperor and joined Horus. Our numerical advantage, our tactical superiority, disintegrated like flesh before a nuclear sunrise. Our reinforcements became the hammer against Horus’s anvil. And so the guns turned.

Night had fallen upon Isstvan, though that could be the floating ash and vast palls of smoke that had blotted out the sun. It mattered not. Black on top of black again, that was the only time when we could move with any hope of secrecy. There was a distant glow to the north, where our treacherous enemies had cast off their cloaks and revealed themselves. I revised my estimate – night was falling. Warriors, or the semblance of warriors in some instances, were stirring from debauched torpor, roused to ritual and supplication in the name of dark gods.

This was supposed to be an age of enlightenment, where superstition had been banished by the light of empirical truth. Where was that light now, I

wondered as I stared into the darkness, recognising the echo of it that had taken root in my soul.

Finished with their sport the death-squad moved on, hooting and grunting in voices barely describable as human any more.

‘We go,’ I said to Usabius and reached down to hook my arm beneath the Raven Guard.

‘Should we mark it?’

As I turned to look at my brother I saw the short metal rod he clutched in his off-hand. It had a small barrel at the end with a number of lightless diodes awaiting activation. Ruuman had given us the seismic mapping staves, said it would help with triangulation. I actually think he was just humouring us with his aid, but Usabius and I were grateful anyway.

‘Do it,’ I said and watched my brother plant the stave deep, twisting the barrel to begin signal transmission.

They were ostensibly designed for siege warfare, but we had an entirely different purpose in mind for them.

‘Secure?’ I asked, eager to move.

With the night came relative obscurity, but it also brought horrors that were not present in the sun.

Usabius paused. ‘I don’t think he’s breathing,’ he replied. I did not see my brother’s face, it was hidden behind the scarred battle-helm he wore, but knew it would be grim.

‘Keep moving,’ I said, as we emerged from behind the drop-ship, trying to block out the noise of murder while still listening for signs of danger.

We got another eighty metres before Usabius hissed, ‘Armour!’

Inwardly, I cursed. We had stayed too long and now our journey back would be long and perilous, if we made it back at all.

A crater, strewn with power armoured corpses, most of their iconography burned away, was our only hope of anonymity.

We plunged down into it, amongst the charred skeletons of warriors we might have known and fought beside. Limbs, torn and limp, slapped against my greaves. A skeletal hand touched its fingers to my face. Another scraped against my shoulder guard and my mind was suddenly filled with images of the dead: putrefied and rotting inside their armour, risen up in damnation and silent accusation at our survival. I banished the thought – it would not serve me here – blaming fatigue and trauma. Cogency was often the first aspect of a warrior’s efficacy to be tested during periods of prolonged and extreme

mental stress. I cannot think of any ordeal greater than Isstvan in my experience.

Scrambling over the bodies, I slipped and went vambrace-deep into the ragged cavity of an ex-legionary's chest. Unflinching, I yanked my hand out, breaking off a piece of already shattered rib, and tried not to linger on the gore coating my gauntleted fist. No honour, no glory in this pit of the dead. Here was a place that heroes went to die, unremembered and unmourned. We were barrow-worms, crawling amongst them. Dragging the lifeless body of the Raven Guard with us, we kissed the earth and tried to burrow down into it.

Hearts hammering in my chest, I felt the low rumble of the tank company rolling towards us through the trembling earth. Before I shut my eyes, concealing the fire burning vitally within them, I noticed vibrating grains of black sand cascading over the edge of the crater and was put in mind again of the hourglass. Then I surrendered to the dark and hoped it would not be my last sight.

Usabius's prediction about the armoured company's arrival saved us both. Death on Isstvan was swift, usually instantaneous. Whatever order had once held sway in this force was gone as Legion commanders left only their worst, their dogs, behind to hunt and scrape our feeble resistance from this world. Soon the legionary-hounds would retreat too and anything that had escaped their teeth and claws would be atomised from orbit.

I tried to focus, concentrate on the act of subterfuge that was necessary for my survival, however much it galled me not to take bolter and blade to these traitors. Some had tried. They slept in craters like the one in which we were hiding. Dwelling on the myriad ways I might meet my own demise would only bring it about quicker. So instead I let my senses bring me back to the present.

It was an unpleasant reunion.

Blood scent, old but still wet, crept into my nostrils. The taste of metal tanged my palate. Decaying flesh was redolent on the hot air coming off the tanks. Visions of the unquiet dead, mouths agape with tongues lolling through nubs of broken, black teeth, returned. I could crush the nightmare in my head, but the stench would not abate so easily. Without the air filters in my battle-helm, I almost gagged.

The hard *chank* of brake blocks, the heady pall of heat from still-cooking engines, announced the tank company's abrupt halt.

‘Thought I saw movement this way,’ a grating, iron voice said like two rusted girders scraping against one another.

One of Perturabo’s sons.

Hate practically emanated off the legionary in waves. I expected to hear the *clank* of booted feet against a tank’s hull, the dull resonance as they stomped down the rungs of a ladder attached to its turret and finally the crunch of earth beneath a heavy tread.

Close inspection at the end of a bayonet would undo our efforts. My gladius was within reach and short enough to draw without needing to rise. I resolved not to go down without a fight…

Instead, I heard a metal creak and the low fizz of a lamp burning into life.

Seconds later a cold, harsh light oozed into the crater and I resisted the urge to crawl deeper into the morass of bodies. Even with my eyes closed, I could detect the change in light and hoped the infinitesimal reaction of my eyelids would not give us away. It moved slowly, like a slick, painting my armour with greasy, oleaginous fingers. I remained still, pretending to be dead, unsure for a moment if I was not dead already, and let the searchlight strafe.

I heard the tanks growling nearby, guttural, bestial. The stench of promethium was noxious. Their crews were talking to one another, though I could not discern what was being said over the comm static. It sounded like a question to whoever was on the searchlight in the turret.

The legionary’s answer was all too audible.

‘Fire’s killed most of them. A few are still fresh, though. We could burn it out again.’

I am a Salamander, born from fire, but even my endurance would not allow me to survive a promethium bath.

There was a pause as whoever was inside the tank replied.

‘At your command, sergeant,’ answered the turret-man, and relief washed over me like a balm.

The heat of the searchlight passed, evaporating like a very real weight lifting from my back. I allowed my heart rate to go back to normal just as the Raven Guard began to stir.

Half-delirious with pain, our brother could not have known our predicament, nor the fact that he imperilled us all with his untimely return to consciousness.

Daring to open my eyes a fraction, I saw the Raven Guard trying to move but was too far away to do anything about it. The tanks that had just begun to roll out again seemed to pause. I heard the legionary in the turret, the crackle of his vox as he told the driver to halt.

Usabius was glaring at me through the cracked left lens of his helmet. It was badly split and I could clearly see the fiery glow of his true eye beneath it. In our frantic flight, our wounded companion had ended up right next to him.

Tracks were grinding against earth, against sand, against bone…

The Iron Warriors were turning back!

Usabius did not stop glaring. As first I thought he was trying to prevent our discovery through sheer determination, as if by willing it we would become invisible. It was only as I reached, millimetre by agonising millimetre, for my bolter that I realised he wanted my permission.

If he did this, it would be on us both. He could not carry the burden of it alone.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, I nodded.

From above, the sound of shifting armour was different – the lead tank was moving alone, returning for a last look with the baleful eye of its searchlight. In the few seconds remaining to us before it reached the edge of the crater and picked out the wounded warrior stirring in its bowels, Usabius reached over with the power fist he wore over his right hand, slowly formed a vice around the Raven Guard's neck and squeezed.

The struggle was momentary. Usabius had to leave his hand there as the heat of the lamp returned.

No more moaning, no more stirring. Our deception was airtight, our hiding place in plain sight secure…

…our consciences indelibly tainted.

We waited in the dark for several minutes until the light had gone and the sound of grinding tank tracks faded, as the Iron Warriors went to look for more survivors to kill. Yesterday we could have roamed this region of Isstvan and been unlucky to encounter a single living soul, but the status quo was changing. Search cordons were widening and with that our chances of discovery increased. The desire of the death-squads to linger over their prey was the sole reason for our stay of execution, the only thing keeping us from the notice of our enemies.

It would not last, and I felt that a few more days, maybe less, remained to us.

Horus was coming, or at least his mad dogs.

More and more, we were being forced to head deeper, farther from the ship and closer to the Urgall Depression where so much blood had already been shed. Time was the only thing we had left, and a slim hope that we would find what we so desperately sought. What then if we did? Nocturnean pragmatism told me we would determine that when it was prudent to do so.

Only once I was certain the Iron Warriors had gone, I rolled onto my back and had to grind my teeth to stop from shouting out.

I met Usabius's gaze, still staring at me across the pile of corpses, and recognised his anguish as the mirror of my own. We had just added another to its grim tally.

'I want to kill…' he murmured, '…all of them.'

'Let's just get back to the *Purgatory*.' Feeling the weight anew, I struggled to my feet and went to help Usabius, who refused.

'Come on,' I said, hooking my arm underneath the Raven Guard's instead.

'He's dead.' Never had a more obvious fact been pointed out to me.

'Haukspeer can remove his gene-seed,' I replied.

If Usabius thought anything about that, he kept it to himself and grabbed the dead warrior's other arm.

As we hauled him from the pit, our armour smeared with the blood and ash that had once been our brothers, I grimaced.

'Your leg?' asked Usabius.

My hand went down almost involuntarily to the crude armature encasing my left leg.

'Ruuman does exceptional work but even his skills are being tested in this hellhole,' I said.

My leg was broken in three places. Haukspeer's diagnosis was four radial fractures of the femur with the fibula and tibia badly splintered. I often pictured the bone jutting from my skin under my armour. Pain suppressors in my system, augmented by what our Apothecary had scavenged, kept me conscious; Ruuman's metal leg brace allowed me to walk, but pain and dysfunction were hampering locomotion.

Billowing smoke clogged the air in the distance, exhaust fumes from the tank company. Other shadows were moving in the gloom too, some in our direction. More death-squads, I reasoned. Something larger too, shambling

awkwardly on long, stalk-like legs. I caught the red flash of its receptor-pits before my brother's voice recalled me.

'It would be easier without the body.' Usabius's implication was almost telegraphed, but echoed what I had been thinking.

My response was unintentionally glib. 'It would be easier if none of this insanity had ever happened.'

Self-indulgent fatalism was pointless. I had already seen several Iron Hands succumb to it, only to die in needless acts of suicidal heroism. Sulnar would have come close were it not for Haukspeer dragging him aboard our drop-ship. I do not think the Medusan really forgave him for that. He had wanted to die with honour, but now he could not even do that. I supposed the death of a parent would do that to a son, drive him to insane acts, then tried not to wonder at the fate of my own father.

'I can make it,' I said, climbing fully from the crater and knowing we needed to bring something back with us.

'Even if we have to avoid them?' Usabius replied, jabbing a finger in the direction of two walkers that slewed around towards us without warning.

We sank down as one, only crouching this time as the misshapen walkers quickly turned their crimson attentions elsewhere. We heard them 'speak' to one another in half machine-code, half animalistic bark, and I struggled again to reconcile these abominations with the other creations of the Mechanicum. Even the death-squads and the butchering cyber-mastiffs were cowed by the blind-hunters. The other shadows scurried away from them or simply stepped out of the walkers' path if they were bold enough, allowing them to do their grisly work unimpeded. I had not seen the blind-hunters during the initial assault and suspected they had been brought in later to cleanse and burn.

Scorch the earth, then salt it.

I gestured east. It would take us longer that way, which was fraught with its own dangers, but at least we would be getting farther and not closer to the blind-hunters. There were no crashed drop-ships this way, either, save for our own. Most of the vessels and what was left of their defenders were west.

Usabius agreed, so we took my heading and trudged off wearily across the black sand.

It would be quieter along these trackless plains, where the death-squads had yet to venture. After fifteen minutes, although I had not trusted my

internal chrono for a while now, the flat desert gave way to rocky crags, then cliffs. Mountains we had dubbed the Blackfangs shouldered into view.

Almost an hour later, creeping through the narrow passes, gorges and defiles, we reached the *Purgatory*.

Shawled in drifting grey and white, it was just another lumpen rock amongst many others, the Salamanders green well obscured. Its wings were long broken, having cascaded into the deep ravines below. Once it was a Stormbird, designation Warhawk VI, but its days of soaring the skies and bearing angels of death were over. Even if they were still intact, the drop-ship's engines were fully burned out, black beyond redemption. Across its crumpled nose cone and prow, the glacis had completely blown out. Only a few jags of armourglass remained, like fangs in the mouth of a beaten beast. I caught the glimpse of a lone warrior standing in a cockpit denuded of anything of use. Tarkan raised an iron hand in greeting to us, a long-barrelled sniper rifle resting peacefully across his lap. Then he was gone again, blending into the shadows, ever vigilant. Our patient watchman had taken this eyrie as his post ever since some semblance of order had been established after the crash.

It was he, in a moment of sardonic humour, who had named our ship and sanctuary *Purgatory*.

No one gainsaid him. Haukspeer had even given an ironic thump of applause.

Our dead passenger growing colder by the moment, Usabius and I passed under an arch of rock that joined the two peaks between which our ship was firmly wedged. From here, the tail end and cargo bay door abutted a broad causeway of rock that wended through the mountain. Like a fortress from ancient, simpler times our metal fastness looked down onto the earth below and our distant enemies gathering slowly, unwittingly to besiege it.

Usabius lifted his hand to the sky.

'Snow?' he said, regarding the white flakes dappling his armour. 'Perhaps the season is changing.'

'No, brother,' I corrected him. 'It's just ash. They are burning again, more pyres in the hills.'

Usabius did not reply.

A cold wind was rising and it blew the ash high into the peaks.

Our heads were bowed as we walked the last few metres to *Purgatory*'s gate. Even in the relative solitude of the mountains, far from the Urgall

Depression, the screams of the dead and dying still followed us.

The cargo door of the drop-ship squealed open on neglected gears, admitting the two of us into a broad bay thronged with warriors.

I nodded to Vogarr and E'nesh, both Iron Hands and Salamanders legionaries returning my greeting even as they aimed bolters at the void beyond the lowered ramp. Once the entrance to the drop-ship was sealed, announced by the pressure-hiss exhalation of pneumatics, they relaxed.

Both legionary watchmen were battered, their armour held together by rapid re-soldering and hope. Each carried a bandolier of grenades too, a single pin pull required to ignite the entire cache and bring the cargo door, as well as much of the ceiling, down on top of anyone attempting ingress that should not be.

Flickering lumen-strips overhead were hardly inviting but, as Vogarr waved us through, Usabius and I stomped noisily into the light, our heavy footfalls ringing against the metal deck underfoot.

We were greeted by Haukspeer, who approached us down an avenue of gurneys and thrown-together bunks and looked down coldly at the corpse we had brought with us.

'You do realise he is dead?' the Apothecary asked, wiping the beaded sweat from his alabaster brow. In the grim lighting of the cargo hold, his chalk-white complexion took on a visceral cast. His eyes, like chips of jet, revealed nothing.

Carefully, we set the wounded warrior down, allowing the other son of Corax to examine him. There were flecks of crimson on the Apothecary's face; behind him, a blood trail left from where a terminal patient had been dragged away was being mopped up.

With a flick of his wrist, Haukspeer engaged the spear-like syringe of his reductor. As he went down onto his haunches, he asked, 'Could you unclasp the breastplate, please?'

Haukspeer had lost an arm. It ended in a cauterised stump just above where his elbow used to be. It did not seem to inhibit his proficiency as an Apothecary. No fewer than seventeen battle-brothers had been brought back from the brink by his skills. Many more continued to live because of his continued ministrations, the sixty or so that surrounded us now on the makeshift beds. This was Haukspeer's infirmary, and it was full to capacity. Several of the wounded had lost limbs or suffered from grievous burns. Others were blind or paralysed. Haukspeer kept them alive, though most

were beyond the ability to fight. It was no army; it was a morgue in waiting. And Haukspeer knew it. I could see it in his eyes, the weary resignation growing with each hollow day that passed. This was not resistance, it was existence. The few Imperial Army troopers we had rescued died quickly and those that lived did so in a catatonic state of fear and denial. Some were used as orderlies, fetching and carrying, wiping up the blood, but that was where their usefulness ended.

The Raven Guard Usabius and I had brought back was beyond even the Apothecary's ability to heal.

I removed the breastplate, and Haukspeer retrieved the gene-seed. Once it was safely secured in one of the tubes attached to his gauntlet, he lingered over his battle-brother's grievous neck injury. Glancing at Usabius's power fist, reading the rigidity in my brother's body language, I knew he had made the connection, and thought Haukspeer was going to say something.

He did, but not what I was expecting.

'Ruuman is waiting for you in the armoury,' he said, turning his back on us, reabsorbed into his work.

We walked away from Haukspeer, through the ranks of bunks, towards the back of the cargo hold and the armoury beyond.

'He knows,' hissed Usabius when we had parted the Apothecary's company.

I nodded. Through my complicity and sanction, I felt as bad as Usabius looked but spoke no further on it. None of that really mattered now. I was not even sure why we had bothered to drag the poor dead Raven Guard across the sands of Isstvan, our insult only adding to his injury.

I was startled as a legionary thrust out his hand to me, seizing my wrist.

I did not recognise him but knew he was of my Legion. One eye was missing, crudely gouged out, and his right leg was severed near to the abdomen. A regimen of drugs hard-lined into his arm kept him conscious but barely lucid. It was much the same story throughout the cargo bay that now served as an infirmary.

'You are Lord Ra'stan,' he said in a cracked whisper.

'I am no lord,' I told him. 'Just Ra'stan now.' I put my hand on his chest to calm him. 'Rest easy, brother.'

'I served in your company,' he wheezed, and tried to slam his fist against his broken plastron until I stopped him.

My eyes narrowed as I sought the name. ‘Ik’rad,’ I said. He nodded. Smiled. Such a small thing that meant so much.

‘Did you find…’ he asked, ‘did you find *him*?’

Something cold reached up from my gut and squeezed my heart. I was surprised how choked my voice was when it finally came out.

‘No.’ Then foolishly I added, ‘Not yet.’

I had just made a false promise to a dying man.

‘Find him,’ the wounded legionary breathed, strength fading as he released me and sank back onto his gurney.

‘I will try.’

The Salamander had let me go, but my hand was still firmly wrapped around his forearm when I felt Usabius’s grip upon my shoulder.

‘Ruuman awaits,’ he uttered softly.

Letting my dying brother go, I nodded slowly and together we walked on without incident. I kept my eyes in front of me all the way to the back of the cargo bay, not wanting another encounter like the one with Brother Ik’rad.

Arriving at the rear of the hold, where the ranks of bunks and slumped warriors finally ended, we were confronted by a pressure panel set into the wall. It was a simple enough metal plate next to another, smaller, door.

I punched it.

Grinding metal assaulted our ears as the armoury opened up to us, but only partially. The door halted halfway, shrieking on protesting servos that were long past misuse. Through the gap I could see a deeper shadow, illuminated even more poorly than the infirmary, and a lone figure toiling within his workshop.

‘Enter,’ said the figure in a hollow, resonating voice that had more in common with steel and gears than flesh and blood. But then Erasmus Ruuman was more machine than man.

I smacked the pressure panel again, this time with greater force. A low, mechanical churning followed but the door opened.

We went inside.

‘It’s seizing again.’

‘It is, Ironwrought,’ I answered.

‘You mistake a statement for a question, Brother Ra’stan.’ Ruuman paused in his labours. He was stripping and fixing a cache of weapons. I saw six bolters and the partially dismantled remains of a Rapier mount, but it was a broken conversion beamer that had the Ironwrought’s attention. ‘A patrol

found it,’ he explained. ‘I am confident it can be repaired to sixty-three per cent effectiveness. You are having trouble with the brace,’ he added, leaving the beamer and facing us.

The entire lower half of Ruuman’s face was bionic, so too much of his torso. It was blended expertly with his armour and gave the Ironwrought a formidable, unbreakable appearance.

I nodded. ‘Another statement, Ironwrought?’

‘Yes.’ He knelt down to inspect my leg brace. Ruuman delved into a tool kit mag-locked to his belt and went to work, selecting the instruments he needed by touch and memory, not looking once. There was a brief but manageable flare of pain as he tweaked the armature he had fashioned.

After a few minutes he asked, ‘Does that improve its efficiency?’

I tested it. Smiled.

‘Much better.’

‘I gauge an eighteen per cent improvement, but its maximum efficacy as a substitute limb will cap at sixty-seven per cent. Miracles, unfortunately,’ he added, ‘are beyond me.’

I put my hand on his shoulder. ‘At any rate, thank you, brother.’

He rose without acknowledging my gratitude.

Erasmus Ruuman was not an Iron Father and he did not possess the technical ability of that august council, but he knew weapons and had applied that knowledge to the other machines in need of repair. As well as my leg, he had kept the drop-ship going and maintained the majority of its damaged systems, including light, heat and oxygen-scrubbing, despite the catastrophic damage it had suffered when we crashed in the mountains. The only thing he could not do was make it fly again.

The deathblow had been delivered by one of our own. When the attack at the dropsite came, we had been brutally unprepared. In what felt like seconds, Ferrus Manus was slain, his vaunted Avernii clan all but wiped out and the Raven Guard and Salamanders crippled without knowledge of whether their liege lords were alive or dead.

We still did not know.

I remember the explosion of noise across the vox when it happened. At first I had thought it was static, caused by some kind of electromagnetism, but now I know it was screaming. A thousand different orders broke all at once. The result was utter chaos. Consolidation and retaliation was our first response. The earth became muddy with our spilled blood soon after, so

retreat was the only viable contingency left to us when that happened. I remember falling back to the dropsite, streamers of missiles and bursts of tracer fire spitting overhead, but have no memory of getting into a ship. Yet somehow we all did; a few survivors who made it through the gauntlet and escaped the first wave of culling. Thrown together by chaos, Salamander, Iron Hand and Raven Guard scrambled for life. Order was abandoned. No fighting retreat, but a rout, a massacre.

We got into the air, thrusters boosting, flames washing our hull and wings, prow nosing through banks of smoke. A few seconds later and something hit us. I felt it through the cargo bay where I hunkered down with forty-three of my brothers and several more who were not of my Legion. A couple of Rhinos we had in reserve slid from their moorings and across the deck. Two legionaries were crushed as the vehicles scraped the cargo bay wall. Gravity dragged them out through the gaping ramp, sweeping another half a dozen warriors with them into the hell outside. Some scrambled but we did not have time to reach the ventral corridor and our cages in the troop hold, so I just held on.

The deck… rippled – I can still see the mark where Ruuman stitched it back together with solder and industrial staples – and began to come apart. Through a ragged gash in our fuselage, through the sparking wires and venting pipes built into the drop-ship's armour, I saw Isstvan.

It was like a dark ocean, studded with islands of fire and undulating with thousands of warriors trying to kill one another. Entire armoured companies went up in chained explosions as the weapons of Titans were unleashed, phalanxes of legionaries were wiped out, heavy incendiaries tore wounds in the very earth itself. My mind could scarcely comprehend the horror I was bearing witness to.

My gaze went skywards as the shadow of another drop-ship crept across my flame-seared face. Looming over me it was massive, blotting out the sun we had striven so hard to reach above the belt of cloud. We sustained a glancing hit, I think – its prow raked our flank, but it was enough to put us down. The other drop-ship was a ball of fire. I saw bodies wreathed in flame, hazed by the heat, trapped in its confines. Some jumped, even though the drop was fatal. A few legionaries had jump packs. Most went up in secondary explosions as their overheated turbines cooked off. Ravens went down, feathers aflame. Iron plummeted from the sky. Drakes burned. The

rest were cut apart by streamers of flak from the entrenched cannons below, sawn in half before they had even gotten clear of the destruction.

I saw a group, a mix of Salamanders and Raven Guard, setting up line launchers as they readied to evacuate across to our ship. I could not hear them through the roar of bloody salvoes and the detonation of explosions, but their urgency was clear enough, as were their gestures to us.

The plan was stillborn, however. A fusillade of missiles from some unseen battery below tore up their lander amidships, pushing a firestorm through its belly that blew the would-be commandos from the hold and into oblivion.

I turned, tried to drag one of my brothers with me, but the conflagration gushed out of the dying ship faster than I realised, burning me in my armour and incinerating my slower brother. He was gone when I looked back, the claw marks of his fingertips etched into steel the only evidence of his fate.

We lurched. The hull groaned and split again, micro-fractures webbing the metal.

I grabbed a bulkhead and held on, feeling gravity leave me for a moment as a perverted sense of tranquillity took over.

Like a comet, our Stormbird fell from the sky but dropped well wide of the Urgall Depression. Gravity violently reasserted itself, slamming my body hard into the deck and shattering my leg. We struck the mountain, rupturing entire cliffs and sending them into the abyssal chasm below us. Our structural integrity held and we lay there, a wounded predator ready to be put out of its misery.

Almost ready, but not quite.

‘How many staves did you plant this time?’ Ruuman asked, bringing my mind back to the present.

‘Six,’ Usabius replied.

The Ironwrought nodded, and almost looked impressed.

‘That was a great risk to do that.’

‘Let us hope a fruitful one then,’ I interjected. ‘For we would risk everything for this.’

‘*We*?’ asked the Ironwrought. ‘Your Legion?’

Although I knew I was vehement, I’m not sure I conveyed the ardency of my belief to Ruuman, but the Ironwrought was largely divorced from emotion.

‘Yes,’ I answered, ‘all of us who are still alive.’

Ruuman held my gaze for a moment, then, showing us his back, he switched on a small scanner sitting on a bench behind him and squared away from the weapons. It was a cluttered space with room enough for three, but only three. As the pict screen came to life in an ugly flare of green neon, a voice from behind us said, ‘You’re late.’

Ishmal Sulnar waited in the doorway to the armoury, arms folded. The Iron Hands legionary was a brute and filled the width of the space easily with his imposing silhouette, but not its height. Sulnar’s head barely came two-thirds up the door frame. For the proud legionary was enthroned in a makeshift wheelchair, part gun carriage, part gurney, with wheels stripped from the broken chassis of an ammo hopper.

Pieces of his armour had been destroyed during the fighting and the crash. He only wore a single pauldron, his left, and both his arms were bare of vambrace or gauntlet. The right arm was entirely bionic, as were his left hand and his right eye. The red retina flickered, on account of its damaged focusing rings. It made Sulnar squint and sometimes pulled up one side of his mouth in a disapproving scowl.

Much of his armoured greaves were missing from just above the knee, so too were his legs.

‘What happened out there?’ he asked.

Usabius failed to rein in his anger.

‘Carnage happened, Sulnar!’

‘Brother turned on brother and thousands died. We lived through that, if you remember it.’

Perhaps it was guilt talking. We never got a chance to discuss it later.

Sulnar unfolded his arms and I tensed for a fraction of a second as I thought he might strike my brother, though he kept his eyes on me. Perhaps he could not meet Usabius’s gaze for fear of what he might do if he did. The Iron Hands legionary might no longer walk but his fists had lost none of their potency.

Sulnar kept his composure, and held up a placating hand.

‘I remember it,’ he answered quietly. ‘We have all lost, brother. Our fathers are missing and we are besieged by enemies we once called allies… even friends.’

‘Your father is–’

I warned Usabius off with a look. Sulnar had deluded himself into believing that Ferrus Manus was not dead. None of us had seen the Gorgon

fall, but the reports we had heard left little doubt. Even still, there was nothing to gain in arguing about it.

‘Nothing,’ Usabius relented. ‘I am sorry, brother. My temperance is being sorely tested this night.’

‘You take on too much,’ said Sulnar. He bowed his head fractionally, but I detected the tremor of involuntary motion in his bionic eye and realised he was hanging by a tender thread. He bore the chair stoically, but it was demeaning. Any contribution he could make now would be minimal and not in the front line of a last stand, as I suspect he would have preferred. We were, all of us, warriors. And as such we would not get to choose the manner in which we died. Cut apart by a dozen blades, beheaded by a sworn friend turned enemy, crushed beneath the treads of a heavy battle engine – during the Dropsite Massacre I had witnessed all of these deaths and many others. I believe, deep down, that Sulnar would have accepted any of them above the fate that awaited him. He waved my brother’s contrition away.

‘And no apology is needed,’ he added. ‘These are trying times for all of us. Impossible, even. I ask again then, what happened?’

I told him, leaving out the part where Usabius crushed the Raven Guard’s neck to maintain our concealment. Sulnar seemed particularly interested in the enemy patrols and their dispositions.

‘Did you encounter any other resistance groups? Any other ships, either grounded or lying in low anchor that we can join up with?’

‘There are none, brother,’ I answered.

Sulnar looked down, thinking. ‘We will try again tomorrow. Only by forging some kind of battle order can we hope to strike back at the traitors. If we could make contact with one of the primarchs…’

Usabius lost his temper again, the objects on Ruuman’s workbench trembling with psycho-kinetic anger. ‘Are you blind in both eyes, Sulnar? There is no resistance. We are not fighting a guerrilla war. This is survival for as long as we can hold out, no more than that.’

Except, he and I knew that was not entirely true. We had not been running the gauntlet with Ruuman’s staves these last days for something to occupy our minds. Our purpose was much greater than that.

Usabius stalked out of the armoury, moving past Sulnar who seemed not to notice or care, and carried on as if nothing had happened.

‘Were you followed?’ he asked.

I shook my head. ‘Though their patrols are widening by the hour. It won’t be long before they decide to venture into the mountains and after that… Well, we all know what happens after that. There is a bottom line to all of this,’ I added.

Sulnar’s studied silence bade me continue.

‘Our time is almost up. We can’t stay here any more. If we do, they will find us and destroy us. We have to move on.’

Sulnar was emphatically blunt. ‘We cannot.’ He rolled back on his wheels so he could gesture to the infirmary behind him. ‘There is no moving on. Most of these legionaries won’t make the journey.’ In a quieter voice, he added, ‘*I* won’t make the journey. This is it for most of these warriors, Ra’stan. Our crusade ends on the black sands of Isstvan, curtailed by treachery and deceit. I do not think it is fitting, but I am pragmatic enough to realise it is irrefutable as our fate.’

‘And the fate of Lord Manus? Why do you refute that?’

Sulnar looked down. ‘Because I have to believe in something. I am half the legionary I was. I cannot be rebuilt, not in these conditions with these resources, so I must sit when I would rather stand. I must wait when I would rather forge out with you. These things I cannot deny, and their weight upon me is a heavy one. The death of my father? *That* I can deny. Until I see it with my own eyes, until I see his headless corpse and not in my nightmares, I choose hope over despair. You have, why not I?’

It was hard to argue, and I could not bring myself to do so anyway. But it did not change some universal truths.

‘They *are* coming,’ I reasserted. ‘It will be soon. You need to be ready.’

‘Make no mistake,’ Sulnar declared, leaning forwards in his chair to emphasise his words, ‘we will all meet these traitorous bastards on our feet, Ra’stan, one way or another. We *are* ready because there is nothing left to us but retribution.’

I was about to continue, but realised it was futile to argue further. Sulnar would stay, so would the others, and in so doing meet their deaths as heroes. What right did I have to deny them that? I nodded.

Sulnar reciprocated the gesture and after a few moments went back to his debrief. ‘Did you penetrate any farther into enemy-held territory?’

‘We made significant inroads towards the Urgall Depression. Most of the enemy’s forces are still concentrated there but beginning to branch. There will be gaps in their pickets that a small commando force could exploit.’ I

licked my lips, mouth suddenly dry. ‘I also think we got close to his ship. Another deep infiltration and I believe we will find it.’

Sulnar rolled forwards on his wheels so he could put his hand on my forearm.

‘You don’t have to do this, Ra’stan.’

But of course I did.

‘I would rather die out there, in search of hope, than trapped in here with our despair and fatalism as my companions.’

I looked at Ruuman, who was busily recording the seismic data from our staves and mapping out the region beyond it.

‘The sensors have a five-kilometre range in all directions,’ he explained to the screen where a rough topography of Isstvan was slowly being sketched out. Data was streaming along one side of the image, too rapidly for my eye to follow but not for the Ironwrought.

A second later and the image collapsed, the screen blanking out into a flat field of green neon.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘Signal interrupt.’

One or more of the staves had been destroyed.

‘Did you get anything?’ I sounded more urgent than I intended.

‘Yes,’ Ruuman replied. He appeared almost reluctant to continue.

My tone was deliberately impatient. ‘Well?’

‘It is his drop-ship, yes.’

My heart leapt, but I held it fast in a fist of my own pragmatism.

‘Intact?’

‘It crashed several kilometres from the Urgall Depression, north of your last recorded position, Brother Ra’stan.’

I struggled to maintain my composure, masking my hope with sudden, direct action.

‘I must go at once,’ I said.

Usabius would want to hear this news.

‘This matter should be discussed first,’ said Sulnar as I pushed past him. ‘Strategy will be needed. Equipment gathered. Even a legionary does not wander into territory overrun by this kind of enemy without first pausing to consider tactics. We must plan our next move.’

I regarded him incredulously. ‘Our next move?’ I said, pausing in front of his hulking plastron but looking down on the crippled warrior. ‘There is but

one course. We go and find the primarch. We rescue Vulkan.’

I tried hard not to hope. On Isstvan it was a cruel, capricious thing. It crept into the heart, the soul, expanding silently but filling the body with warmth and vigour. But it was not real. What the hopeful did not realise was that hope was a flame that burned you from within, turning your spirit and your will to ash so that when it inevitably faded there was nothing left behind but a hollow shell.

If Vulkan was dead like Ferrus Manus, I vowed I would not submit to the same denial as Sulnar. I would bear it, and do so stoically as every Fireborn son of Nocturne had been taught to shoulder adversity.

If my father was slain, I would mourn, expressing my grief in a final, violent, red act against my enemies.

But if he lived…

Hope was kindled and then I knew I was its willing slave.

I found Usabius up at the prow. He was not difficult to track down. Drop-ships are sizeable craft but most of ours was uninhabitable. Aside from Haukspeer’s infirmary, the armoury and the ‘strategium’, as Sulnar mistakenly referred to it, there was only one place left to go.

It was ripped out and ragged, the roof long gone and now part of the battle debris littering Isstvan. The drop-ship had a long neck to the cockpit and I walked the entire length like it was some bleak processional. Either side were the twin troop holds, their cages wrecked and torn out. When I was about halfway down, I saw the sniper. Armoured in iron-black, the white hand emblazoned proudly, the son of Medusa looked strangely at ease with his posting.

Tarkan bowed his head to me as I walked along the grey-swathed corridor to the cockpit. He was kneeling down, etching something into the metal walls of the ship with his combat knife, and stood up just as I approached. I paused when I remembered something about his eyrie, but Tarkan had already deactivated the proximity mines before I even reached the section of the prow that was rent open to the elements. After that I felt his gunsights on me until I emerged fully into the half-light.

It was not the first time I had come up here. Usually, I came alone and Tarkan seemed content to let me be so with my thoughts and concerns. He had never once asked me why I was here or tried to engage in conversation.

A red moon waxed overhead. It was like an iris of blood, its large black pupil created by palls of drifting smoke. Ash smothered the shattered

mechanisms and exposed workings of the drop-ship in grey-white. Pipes choked with it, cogitators and display screens suffocated. It was as if fire had decided to reclaim our ship, drag it back down into a sea of dust where it would be silent forever. Perhaps we were being dragged down with it, only the dust was moving too slowly for us to realise our peril and it would therefore be too late to do anything about it when we did.

As Tarkan left us to return to the shadows, as he often did, I walked up beside Usabius and followed his gaze across the mountains and to Isstvan beyond.

Another range of mountains, the mirror to our own Blackfangs, stretched away to the south. Behind it was a vast and empty salt plain, as desolate as my mood. The pyres were still burning, higher and more ferociously than ever. They reminded me of furnaces in some infernal machine, fuelled by treachery and betrayal. It was hard to fight down my anger at the sight of them, so I looked away.

‘One more mission, my friend,’ I said.

Usabius half-turned in profile. ‘Ruuman found something?’

My brother too, then, had been harbouring hope.

‘The primarch’s drop-ship. It is confirmed.’

I was smiling as Usabius faced me. Even through his battle-helm his eyes lit up like beacons.

‘Vulkan lives?’ he said, disbelieving at first but then with greater confidence. ‘Vulkan lives!’

He clapped my shoulders, his voice quailing with emotion.

I counselled caution, even though my own fell hopes were beginning to run away with me.

‘It is just a Stormbird, brother.’

‘How close to the enemy?’

‘Too close, but potentially far enough away that it may have escaped undetected.’

‘This is a sign, brother. I can feel it.’ Usabius clenched a fist and there was a flicker of cerulean blue within the embers of his irises. ‘We must leave immediately.’

I put a hand on his arm. Firmly.

‘No. The Depression will be crawling with traitors by now. Our best chance is to wait until just before nightfall again.’

Usabius was adamant. ‘It might be too late by then!’

I held his arm fast. ‘He has survived this long, brother. If we fail now then we won’t get another chance. If either we or the primarch are discovered through our lack of preparation and caution then we all die.’

Usabius relented, and I let him go.

‘How is it to be done, then?’

‘Sulnar wants to discuss it in the strategium.’

‘The cripple has lost his mind, Ra’stan. He still thinks Ferrus Manus is alive and not slai–’ Usabius stopped, remembering Tarkan. He lowered his voice. ‘He decides this mission?’

‘He is the ranking officer.’

‘And half a lieutenant, does that equal a fully battle-worthy captain?’

‘Calm down. You’re letting your emotions overwhelm you.’

Letting me go, Usabius turned away.

‘I won’t be attending his meeting,’ he said flatly. ‘I’ll wait for you at the cargo ramp, ready to depart.’

I bowed my head. ‘If that is your wish.’

‘It is.’

I allowed a pause between us and let the magnitude of our discovery sink in.

The primarch.

Vulkan.

‘I had begun to despair, brother,’ I confessed.

‘As had I,’ Usabius replied, his voice barely louder than a whisper. ‘If only I could use my gifts…’

The Nikaean Edict had seen Usabius reduced to a trooper of the line, a warrior who became one of my charges when before he had been my equal. He shouldered the burden with good grace and was an exemplary trooper. But it was not adherence to an outmoded oath that held his powers in check – since the betrayal many of the old Librarius had been ready to unleash their abilities again – it was fear.

Not emotional fear, not fear of reprisal or sanction, but rather an unwillingness to open himself to the myriad torment and anguish. All that pain, all that death distilled into a single blow of psychological force. Any attempt to *find* our father that way would likely have killed him and all those nearby to him in a backwash of psychic energy.

At the very least, it would have driven Usabius mad. I was surprised he had not cracked already.

‘We will find him, brother,’ I muttered softly.

‘At the cargo bay ramp,’ he said. ‘I’ll be waiting for you.’

I nodded, leaving Usabius to his thoughts.

Tarkan stopped me as I was walking past him back down the ventral corridor. He put his hand against my shoulder, but did not look me in the eye.

‘Did you find what you needed out there?’ he asked, his voice deep and grating.

I stared, nonplussed.

‘My brother will join me later,’ I replied.

He looked as if he were about to say something else when he simply patted my pauldron and let me go.

I looked down at where he had been scoring the walls of the drop-ship.

‘What is that?’ I asked, seeing letters worked into the metal. I read some of them: *Desaan*, *Vutlich*, *Konn’ador*, *Tarsa*, *Igataron*, *Mendenach*. The names were many but not ordered by Legion or company, rather by remembrance. I knew then the answer to my own question. It was a memorial.

‘The wind here is harsh,’ Tarkan explained. ‘It erodes the marks. The ash covers it too. I am ensuring they are not forgotten.’

‘I knew there was a shrine to the dead on the *Purgatory*,’ I said. ‘But I had no idea it was here and you were its curator.’

‘Not all of them are dead,’ Tarkan replied. ‘Some are just missing.’ He brushed away a swath of ash, revealing two names I was painfully familiar with.

Corax.

Vulkan.

Both missing, presumed alive or dead depending upon whom you talked to.

‘I think we all need closure before we meet our last battle,’ said Tarkan. ‘I hope you get yours. I hope it can heal you, brother.’

Not really knowing what he meant, I thanked him and walked away.

‘Emperor walk with you,’ I heard him call as I was leaving the eyrie.

‘And you, Tarkan.’

Usabius was as good as his word.

After our discussion in the ship’s prow, I had not seen him for the rest of that night and all of the following day until that moment. He was waiting by

the cargo bay ramp, a bolter slung on its strap over one shoulder, power fist encasing his right hand and arm. He had also scavenged some grenades from somewhere and they sat snug in his webbing. A bolt pistol was holstered at his right hip and there were a few extra clips in his weapons belt. The battered helmet with its cracked retinal lens and scorch marks still covered his face.

He nodded as he saw me.

As I returned the gesture, Vogarr and E'nesh nodded to me too.

The watchmen had not left their post. Only death would see it prised from their control. Much like Sulnar, they had accepted their fate and would wait here until the end.

I was about to speak when Usabius inclined his head and I saw a third legionary join our party.

'What are you doing here, Apothecary?' I asked.

Haukspeer had emerged out of the shadows, armed and armoured for war. Casting off his reductor, he had replaced it with a lightning claw and the battle-helm he wore was beaked like a bird's head and black as coal.

'Isn't it obvious?' he said, speaking through the vox-grille of his avian helmet.

'I see a legionary who has abandoned his oath to heal and adopted the posture of a warrior.'

'Nothing nearly so poetic, Ra'stan,' Haukspeer replied, seemingly unfazed by my unintentional barb. 'I want to die fighting with my wings spread wide and a war shriek on my lips, not caged in here with the injured and the dead.' He waved his lightning claw, encompassing the entire hold. 'My usefulness as a healer has ended. If what you say is true about the enemy advancing then I have done everything I can for these legionaries. To preserve them like this, to keep them alive only for them to be slaughtered later, is not why I was called to the Apothecarion. So if I cannot mend, then let me *break*. I would kill the enemies of my Legion and the enemies of the Emperor one last time before I surrender to the long dark and fly no more.' He clenched his fist and a shock of energy sparked down his claws. 'Even if those enemies are my erstwhile cousins.'

I looked sidelong at Usabius, who gave the slightest inclination of his head.

I was glad, for I too wanted the Raven Guard as part of our mission.

'Besides,' Haukspeer added, 'alone, you will only get yourself killed.'

The sound of Sulnar's wheelchair approaching us interrupted my reply, and I turned to face our crippled commander.

'The plan is set,' he said. 'I come to wish you good hunting.'

I bowed to the Iron Hand, who gave a mirthless half-smile in response.

'We will draw and keep them here,' he went on. 'But our sacrifice must be worth something.'

'If Vulkan is alive, we will find him,' I said. I stared at Sulnar for a moment, at his staunch refusal to give up, his noble bearing despite his injuries, and his misplaced pride. 'Are you sure you won't come with us? Leave here and find another sanctuary. Keep moving and live, Sulnar.'

'Just as you must go, Ra'stan, some of us must stay behind. If the traitors are amassing here then your route will be less perilous because of it. Let me give you that. Let *us* give you that.'

I clasped his forearm in the warrior's grip. To Ruuman behind him, I nodded.

'Make the scum beyond these mountains work for every drop of your blood,' I told him.

'I swear it on the life of Ferrus Manus.'

Unfortunately, Sulnar's oath was not a reassuring one.

And then the gate to the *Purgatory* opened, letting us back out into hell.

I recalled the mission briefing. Sulnar had looked long and hard at the hololithic projection of the dropsite. Compared to the sheer size of the forces that had landed on it and the range of mountains where we had made our lair, the Urgall Depression was a modest area some twenty kilometres across.

A single beacon, put there by Ruuman, had winked enthusiastically on the intermittent display. This was the crash site of Vulkan's drop-ship as divined by the seismic mapping staves before they had been destroyed. The distance from the *Purgatory* to the drop-ship was not inconsiderable. Several routes were plotted, flashing up as broken green lines barely visible through machine static. Those that would have brought us too close to the known enemy dispositions and the Urgall Depression itself, where the majority of traitor encampments could be found, were discounted. These lines had winked red, the path too dangerous to cross.

I spoke little during the briefing, my eagerness to move out clouding my thoughts. I felt the eyes of the others upon me throughout, weighing and measuring as if to determine my suitability for the task. As one of the

Fireborn, how could I be *more* suitable? Perhaps Usabius had been right to abstain, but then one of us needed to represent the Legion.

Vulkan was *our* primarch. If he lived we would find him, and bring him back.

By the time we concluded, Sulnar had seemed satisfied with that but would commit no additional resources to our cause. Going out in force would only attract unwanted attention to us and jeopardise the mission. Haukspeer's appearance at the ramp was therefore doubly surprising.

So there we stood, four legionaries around a flickering hololith looking on at a broken green light as if its colour could make it any safer or guarantee success.

Our chosen route was not without peril. We left the mountains, two warriors cloaked in the shadows, one a part of the darkness, and went south. Our trail took us through the wrecker's yards, the fields of broken and gutted vehicles, crashed ships and the sundered forms of dead battle tanks. The debris was dense here, the cargo holds and crew compartments picked clean of life and therefore sparse when it came to our enemies.

Only a few sporadic packs of hunters slowed us down, World Eaters death-squads that brought out a rush of anger in Haukspeer that he quickly marshalled before exposing our position. They had come to the Isstvan system before, the Raven Guard, touched down on the third planet in the Redarth Valley to rejoice in another world compliant and illuminated by the Imperial Truth. That light had flecks of shadow in it now, tainted like an old lumen-strip, brown at the edges and flickering close to expiration.

World Eaters, no longer the War Hounds, opposed them on their return. I knew because I had been privy to the tactical briefings, looking on in solemn silence like many of my fellow brother-captains, as it was described how we would fight and kill our former brothers. I also knew, because Haukspeer had described the attack to me, the sheer ferocity of Angron's Legion and then the perfidy that followed when the Night Lords revealed their true allegiance.

Where once we had rivalries and allies to measure against, to aspire to and jockey with, now we had nemeses, every bloodied one of us. I thought of Curze's sons as ours in many respects, because of what happened before during the early years of the Crusade. I had heard about it, rather than seen it unfold, but knew it had left an indelible mark upon us and our relationship with the midnight clad VIII Legion.

We left the wrecker’s yard with night falling and the howls of the maddened throng chasing us into the darkness. Going west, we skirted the fringe of the Urgall Hills, entering more rugged terrain where the volcanic sand lapped at the edge of a barren steppe like the waves of a black and lonely ocean.

Up another rise, the steppe giving way to much craggier, hilly environs, we crested a long dark ridge and looked down a wide valley of even deeper shadow.

‘I remember this place,’ said Haukspeer with just enough breath to be heard. The Apothecary had been part of a survey team that had made landfall on Isstvan V, but they had found only ash and nothing of Isstvan III’s original bucolic beauty.

The cliff that dropped away a few metres in front of us was almost sheer but not impossible to traverse. Though he had advanced ahead of Usabius and me for a better look into the valley, I noticed he took great pains not to disturb any scree at the summit of the ridge. Tiny cascading stones might seem innocuous enough but we did not yet know what lurked in the valley darkness, if it slumbered or was waiting for prey.

‘Though we did our best to grind it down with our arrival, there was life here once,’ said the Raven Guard. ‘Green and purple heather, lichen of a deep cobalt blue that clung tenaciously to the pale rock. Dark, loamy soil was ripe for growth. We wounded it, but this… now…’

It was a wasteland that stretched before us: bare rock, hard sand, dead earth. Nothing would live here ever again.

‘That was Redarth Valley,’ I asserted. ‘On Isstvan Three, brother. Not here. Not this world.’

‘Of course…’ Haukspeer stumbled. The long nights had taken a toll on us all, challenged our sense of reality. ‘You’re right. This isn’t Redarth.’

He nodded solemnly, too moved to speak further at first.

‘Wait here while I scout the way ahead,’ he said at last. Then he was gone, a wraith blending back into the shadows and becoming a concomitant part of them.

Only when the Raven Guard had been gone for several minutes did Usabius speak up.

‘It’s a miracle we have reached this far, brother.’

‘And yet, here we stand. Sulnar was adamant their sacrifice would open the gate into the traitors’ territory to us. It seems he was right.’ I looked out

to the north behind us and then the west towards the Urgall Depression. The fires were brighter and higher than ever, burning the sky with their hot talons. Death-squads were on the move, I heard their loud, discordant horns blaring into the night. A call to arms, to murder or the simple announcement of survivors found and drawn into the hunt?

Usabius's voice brought me back from my morbidity. 'On the other side of this valley lies our father's ship. Vulkan may be within our grasp.'

'Have you thought what we will do if we find him?' I turned to regard my brother, emphasising the pointedness of my question.

'*When* we find him, you mean.'

'No, *if*.'

Usabius muttered something. For a moment I thought his anger and indignation would flare again, just as it had earlier aboard the *Purgatory*, but it faded.

Capitulating, his shoulders sagged a fraction.

'I had hoped the primarch would know what to do.'

'We are, more than ever, in need of his guidance.' I hesitated to speak aloud what I was thinking next, but avoiding it was not addressing it. 'And if we find his body, if he *is* dead, what then, Usabius?'

My brother sighed, a long, deep exhalation that carried with it all of his anxiety and uncertainty. 'Then we will go on for as long as we can, honouring Vulkan's memory and burning our enemies to ash.'

It was a good answer.

'Unto the anvil, brother,' I said, brimming with the fire of affirmation.

'Unto the anvil,' echoed Usabius.

A second later, I noticed Haukspeer returning from his reconnoitre. After giving me a curious look, head cocked slightly to one side like a bird, he said, 'Far as I can tell, the way is clear for the first few kilometres at least. But there is something in the air of this place…' He paused, and I heard the disquiet he felt in his voice when he continued. 'Staying overlong in this valley would not be wise, I think. All my instincts are screaming at me to avoid it.'

'Like an ambush?' I asked.

'No,' Haukspeer said. 'Something else, something I can't quite identify.'

'We could go wide of the valley, risk the fringes of the Urgall Hills?'

Haukspeer shook his head, already turning to make his descent a second time. 'Too dangerous,' he said. 'We head down, eyes and ears open.' He

looked over his shoulder, over the silent power generator that fed his armour. ‘I will lead.’

Usabius shrugged to me, and we followed the Raven Guard into the shadows.

We lost sight of Haukspeer almost immediately after we reached the foot of the valley. It was a deep basin, angular and narrow like a jagged blade but more than wide enough to accommodate three legionary warriors.

Within minutes I felt the same intangible sensation that had unsettled Haukspeer. With less than a hundred metres in my wake, a strange harrowing feeling stole over me. Like razors in my mouth, though there was no blood, or grit beneath my fingernails despite the fact that my hands were encased in ceramite. An *itch* was the only way I could think to describe it, like a gunsight at the back of my head or a knife a hair’s-breadth from my exposed throat.

‘Do you feel that?’ I asked Usabius in a whisper.

‘Like chewing on rusty nails or walking on glass.’

‘Yes,’ I said, realising that we had stopped. I checked the retinal display in my battle-helm. The distance reading since we had set foot in the valley was eighty-eight point eight eight metres.

Precisely.

‘Strange…’ I muttered.

The vox crackled in my ear.

‘*I’ve found something.*’ Haukspeer’s voice sounded strained.

‘Are you all right, brother? You don’t sound your–’

‘*Come quickly, and quietly. Follow the route to my ident-icon exactly, no deviations,*’ he said, adding, ‘*I can’t believe I didn’t see this before,*’ then cut the link.

Haukspeer was not far. He crouched down by a mound of stones, examining each one with the tips of his lightning claw.

As soon as we reached his position I checked my retinal display: five hundred and twelve metres. Again, it was an exact reading, the dial ending on zero the moment I had stopped moving.

‘Eight times eight times eight…’ I breathed.

Haukspeer turned sharply. ‘What did you say?’

‘I don’t know why I said that.’ I gestured to the mound. ‘What are you looking at?’

It was twice the height of a legionary, with a wide base that tapered up to a point. Veiled in the black volcanic dust and ash of Isstvan, it was hard to make out what it was.

Tentatively, Haukspeer brushed away the worst of the dust and I saw a skull underneath.

My heart lurched as I fought down the bile rising in my stomach, doused the hot rage warming my face and body.

‘Are they who I think they are?’

Haukspeer could only nod. He clenched his fist, releasing an energy flurry across his talons.

Usabius was similarly dumbstruck at first.

It was a mound of skulls, the heads of our Legion brothers. I balked at just how many.

‘There will be vengeance for this,’ Usabius hissed.

‘Look around us,’ said Haukspeer, lost in a pit of his own private despair.

I did.

Unnoticed until that moment, we were surrounded by pillars of skulls like the skeletal remains of some vast and ancient ruin. Cloaked in volcanic black, they varied in size and form. Some were columnar, others were flat plains of bone or winding ossuary roads fashioned from the deaths of our brothers.

Underfoot, the ground crunched like shale or the shelled bank of some beachhead. It was neither; we walked upon the skeletons of our slain kin, grinding them down to dust with every booted step.

Wrath, inchoate but rising, filled me. Like someone had turned a switch in my mind, I was suddenly possessed of the urge to kill the ones responsible for this. Hateful red hazed my vision, and I welcomed it. I heard the beat of my own angry hearts in my head – after a while it sounded like a chant.

No, wait… It *was* a chant.

‘Do you hear that too?’ I asked, speaking through clenched teeth. My jaw was wired so tight, I thought it would snap.

Usabius nodded.

‘I hear it,’ Haukspeer gurgled through saliva foaming at the corners of his mouth.

It foamed at mine too, and tasted like blood.

‘That way,’ said Usabius, and I followed his outstretched, trembling finger.

‘It’s coming from this direction,’ said Haukspeer. Through the drumming of the blood in his head, I wondered if he had heard my brother.

We would never find out. When he set off after the chanting sound, we followed.

Blade wounds, both old and raw, crosshatched the stooping warrior’s skin, which was also pockmarked with scabbed-over bullet holes. Patches of what looked like entire continents of bruising fashioned a map of scarification that stretched across his broad back. He was over-muscled, even for a legionary, bulked out obscenely, sunk to his haunches and scratching incessantly at the cloven skull gripped by his meaty fingers. A great mane of black, wiry hair crawled from beneath his battle-helm and ran down his spine to the top of his greaves. Chains wrapped his wrists in place of vambraces and, though he worked at the skull with a slaughterman’s fervour, he also possessed a butcher’s skill.

We had descended into the dark valley, where once Haukspeer had set foot during better times. How they had changed that this brute overseer was now the valley’s only occupant. And he *was* a brute. I knew the World Eaters were rabid dogs, but Angron’s Legion had fallen far indeed if they were flensing the flesh of their brothers and displaying their efforts as macabre trophies.

An axe was planted in the earth nearby, its blade stained rustred. Next to it was a pile of bodies, stripped clean of armour and trappings, naked for the butcher’s block. On the World Eater’s opposite side was his incarnadine harvest, bones ready for the fresh mound he was building.

It was ritual, any casual observer could see that, and it turned my very stomach to witness it. Revulsion quickly gave way to wrath, as I felt my blood stir in bizarre empathy with the red deeds before me.

Haukspeer was already up from where we had hidden, igniting his lightning claw in a burst of azure energy.

Sniffing, seemingly scenting the sudden wash of ozone, the World Eater arose. He was a head taller than me, which put him head and shoulders above Haukspeer and just above Usabius. The skull he had been working was discarded, clattering to the ground like forgotten offal, and the World Eater seized his ruddy axe instead. In the other hand, he still clutched his fat-bladed flensing knife.

So fevered had the butcher been in his labours that his naked torso was painted red, so too his horned war-helm, the familiar white and blue

legionary colours almost obliterated by blood. I saw marks etched on it, an eightfold tally on either temple and a strange device emblazoned upon the forehead. It was tribal, old beyond reckoning – a snarling, angular face.

The bestial World Eater echoed the mark in his expression. He had ripped off the mouthpiece of his helm and I could see his sharpened teeth as they spread in a feral smile.

It was uncharacteristic of Haukspeer to attack so brazenly; it went against the tactics of his Legion, but then nothing about this encounter was typical. Even as I embraced my own anger, I could not shake the sensation that we were being manipulated by something in this valley, something that had been bubbling beneath the surface and that was now awakened thanks to our presence. I did not know how I was aware of this, nor why my companions seemed ignorant of the fact, but I could not deny the nagging feeling.

It did not matter. I just wanted to kill.

Haukspeer attacked like a madman, springing at the World Eater with an avian curse screeching from his lips.

The World Eater parried the lightning claw, an all-or-nothing strike that sheared the warrior's axe in two but left him unscathed. He replied with a heavy punch to Haukspeer's gut that doubled the Raven Guard over as it cracked his plastron, lifting him a few centimetres off the ground. He staggered back, gasping noisily through his beak-like mouth-grille.

Stunned and winded, Haukspeer grunted and flew at the World Eater again but the heavy warrior moved with surprising speed, ducking the hasty blow and smashing his thick forearm across the Raven Guard's throat, flattening him.

Before the World Eater could claim his kill, I leapt to aid Haukspeer, who had stayed prone and was fighting for breath.

Close up, the World Eater stank. Blood, sweat, metal – it was a heady odour that sent black sparks spitting through my brain. Heat haze shimmered at the edge of my sight, red-hued and angry. I swung, making contact with the warrior's shoulder even as I felt the bite of his flensing knife under my ribs. He grunted as his clavicle collapsed beneath my attack, and I felt his left arm go limp. The right, in which he held the knife, sawed. The knife chewed through battleplate, the burring teeth of the savage blade as hungry as the warrior wielding it.

I struck again, hammering the World Eater with my fist, the blow hard enough to crush bone and split several fused ribs.

Still the World Eater sawed and I could smell my meat cooking with the frenzied action of his knife.

‘Usabius!’ I cried out, not knowing what had happened to my brother but catching a glimpse in my peripheral vision of the Salamander on his knees, holding on to his head and screaming.

That confirmed it – something dark had a hold of us here in this valley and we needed to get away from it as soon as possible.

I rained blow after blow against the World Eater, pummelling his body, mashing his torso to paste. At last the pressure eased, the knife stopped churning and I was able to sag down to my knees, my enemy lying dead before me.

No, not just dead… *Destroyed*.

So much blood, the World Eater was barely humanoid any more. His face and upper body were gone, reduced to fragments of gore-spattered bone. I had killed many times, sometimes brutally, but never like this. I scarcely recognised the damage inflicted as caused by my own hand and looked down at my bloodied fingers in sheer disbelief.

‘He’s de–’ I began to say when Haukspeer smashed me off my feet.

Snarling incoherently, the Raven Guard bore me down. Even one-handed, he was ferocious and I felt the sting of his lightning claw as it caressed my right flank. I twisted as we fell, using my superior weight to turn us and throw Haukspeer clear as we landed.

He scrambled to his feet first. I had barely got to one knee, his claw casting lightning arcs as it flailed.

‘Desist!’ I shouted at him, barely dodging a thrust and only able to because the Raven Guard’s usual finesse had been usurped by frenzy. That, and he was also still dazed from the World Eater’s savage assault. He seemed to want to continue the brawl but with me as his opponent.

And for a few seconds, I wanted that too. I wanted to gut the Raven Guard, to snap his fragile wings and feed them to him, to crush his bird-like skull in my fist, to pulp his limbs, to–

I shook it off. Literally, *shook* it off. The angry haze did not dissipate, but it lessened so I could see without looking through a red-rimmed lens.

‘You are not yourself!’ I cried, adopting a defensive stance and trying to find Usabius.

Haukspeer screamed, crafting a wild swing with the intention of removing my head.

I countered, pushed into the blow and used my arm to break the attack. With my off-hand, I cuffed him, denting one side of his battle-helm and smacking him sideways across the ground.

‘Haukspeer,’ I bellowed, ‘you are fighting an ally. It is me. It is Ra’stan,’ I pleaded. Not because I was afraid he would kill me, but because I did not want to kill him.

But the Raven Guard was not listening. He tore off his damaged helm, optics fizzing and useless on the right side, to reveal a mask of pure anger over his alabaster face.

‘*Merciful Vulkan…*’ I breathed as he came at me.

If I could not bring him back from this rage, I would have to kill him.

This time he jabbed, using his claw like a quartet of gladius blades. I shifted my weight, stepping aside at the last moment, taking a flesh wound because of how late I left it to move, and smashed my elbow into his exposed back. The power generator crumpled. With a second blow I ripped away some of its housing, and took a clump of cables with it. The effect was instantaneous, as Haukspeer’s armour was no longer buoyed up by this external power source. The sudden mass dragged him down, slowed him down, as it exerted pressure and hard gravity.

I used my weight to bring him to the ground, used my knee to hold down his claw arm, my forearm across his throat.

‘Usabius!’ I cried out again, calling for help but also wary that my brother might have succumbed to a similar violent affliction. There was no answer and I could not see him, nor look around properly to find out what had happened to him either.

Now incapacitated, Haukspeer was calming. With the end of battle, his biology was slowing again, returning him to the ‘ready position’ all us legionaries remain poised at when not in combat.

‘Cease,’ I said, trying to soothe with my tone and cadence.

His chest was not heaving so rapidly any more, the spittle on his mouth was draining away, his eyes were not so wide and narrowed by the second.

‘Cease,’ I repeated, easing up a fraction to gauge whether Haukspeer could be trusted.

Breathing slowly, he gave a small nod, licked his dry lips and swallowed back a mouthful of saliva to moisten his razor-raw throat.

‘I’m all right,’ he rasped. ‘Let me up.’

I needed to be sure.

‘Who is your primarch?’ I asked, maintaining pressure.

‘Corax.’

‘And where is your home world?’

‘Deliverance.’

‘And who are you?’

‘Morvax Haukspeer, Apothecary, Eighteenth Company Raven Guard.’

‘Good enough.’

I let him up, Haukspeer refusing my proffered hand out of pride. He struggled with his malfunctioning power generator. It sputtered, a vibrating hum clearly audible where once it was cloaked and silent. I had robbed him of that, taken away his advantage.

‘I’m sorry, brother.’

‘You had no choice,’ the Raven Guard replied, but I could tell he was bitter at the loss of his stealth and saw how he grimaced when he tried to move in his armour. ‘Feels like lead,’ he muttered, grunting with effort.

I caught a glimpse of Usabius in my eyeline, also recovered, when Haukspeer asked, ‘Help me remove some of this. It’s just dead weight now.’

Malfunctioning generator, vambrace and pauldron were all removed. He did not go back for his helmet either, content to take a fistful of the dark earth and rub it into his pale features to obscure them.

After it was done, I watched Haukspeer test his new range of motion and encumbrance. Incredibly, he was still swift and as quiet as the grave.

‘You have a gift,’ I told him, meeting Usabius’s gaze as he approached from behind the Raven Guard. My brother gave me a look that said all was well, but that the experience had drained him. I decided that my questions could wait.

‘Then let’s not waste it,’ Haukspeer replied.

Before we pressed on, knowing we could not linger, I stooped to regard the skull that the World Eater had been inscribing. I did not pick it up or touch it – some innate sense of self-preservation, some primal warning instinct stopped me – but I saw the mark scrimshawed into the bone. It was the same one the dead traitor wore upon his helm: that angular, snarling face.

‘Destroy it,’ Usabius hissed in my ear.

I stood up and brought my boot down, rendering the skull into fragments.

Nascent rage dogged my thoughts and demeanour. Even this act of simple, emotionless destruction brought with it a burgeoning desire to do more harm.

‘We should leave,’ said Usabius.

‘Yes, let’s be gone from this place,’ I replied.

Haukspeer nodded. ‘I never want to see it again.’

There was only death here now, seeped into the earth; death and hate and rage.

Gratefully, hastily, we left the valley of bones behind.

I crouched atop a pillar of rock, watching Haukspeer approach the edge of the crash site in the distance. From my vantage, I had an excellent view of the Urgall region including its hills, volcanic ash plains and the Depression itself.

I could also see the warbands to the west, for I can think of no other way to describe them; of traitors migrating outwards in a horde. Something had roused their interest and, when they appeared to be headed north, I wondered if Sulnar had put his sacrificial plan into action.

‘Our encounters on this journey have been mercifully light, brother,’ said Usabius, sitting on his haunches next to me. It was as if he could read my thoughts, and I nodded at his remark.

‘But at what cost? How many legionary lives will be lost to this cause?’

Across the plains, like ants forming a colony, the traitors began to converge. Some strode silently, purposefully; others chanted or rode on the backs of armoured columns. It was a massive force, one brutally capable of destroying any lingering loyalist resistance hiding out in the mountains. Mercifully the *Dies Irae* had long since quit the planet, doubtless slaved to another of the Warmaster’s fell causes, but the Titan’s absence would provide no stay of execution for our brothers.

Usabius took on a conciliatory tone, as if he could sense the guilt and anguish I felt at leaving our allies to their deaths. ‘Those lives were already lost, Ra’stan. They were lost the moment the traitors turned their guns on us and started shooting.’

I knew Usabius was right but it did not make the sight of my brothers’ gleeful killers any easier to take.

Averting my gaze, I concentrated back on the crash site.

Without his armour, the Raven Guard was not quite the wraith he used to be but he still moved with incredible stealth, and I lost track of him on several occasions as he picked his way through the wreckage.

‘Like a ghost,’ I said to the air.

‘Isn’t that almost literally what they’ve become, what all the shattered Legions have become?’ said Usabius.

‘Except the Raven Guard have the skill and stealth to turn that into an asset.’

Haukspeer had kept his lightning claw; of all his trappings it still functioned and it was a formidable weapon. He kept it low and by his side, ready to silence any sentries. During my military career I had not had many occasions to witness the XIX Legion in combat, but if this was the lethal efficacy of their Apothecaries, I shuddered to think what their assault troops were capable of.

‘Walking amongst the shadows as if he’s part of them,’ Usabius added.

‘Fortunate, then, that we have him as our scout,’ I said, casting a sideways glance at the Urgall Hills to our right and the sounds of ritualistic chanting now echoing loudly through them. The warbands were closing. ‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘A dark seed was sown within them, brother,’ Usabius answered. ‘It took root in both their minds and bodies, and this is the manifestation of it. This *evil*.’

I briefly met my brother’s gaze. ‘You experienced the sheer pervasive force in the valley. Haukspeer almost killed me because of it.’

‘Yet we did not succumb to its effects, nor were we suborned by our own naturally violent instincts. If this is something that can be fought, then we did that. It is why our brothers hold true to their loyal oaths, I think.’

My eyes narrowed as I sought a truth that Usabius was skirting. ‘So you do not think this to be simple rebellion?’

‘Was what happened in that valley of skulls *natural*?’

‘No,’ I said, remembering the madness of it. Now I thought back, it was as though something had taken me over, or at least was appealing to my baser instincts. Perhaps it was not something foreign after all, but rather a fundamental part of my psyche that I kept hidden or shackled. Alien mind control was something the Legiones Astartes had encountered before, but it could be explained after a fashion. It was exactly that, *alien*, but the experience in the valley was different. It felt more like expression, like a pre-existing part of me had been unleashed and allowed its rein. Oddly, the realisation of that disturbed me more now that I thought I understood it.

I wondered whether Usabius had considered the same thing and I asked, ‘What did you feel in the valley, when the rage enfolded us?’

Usabius slipped from my gaze as if shamed that he did not, or could not, come to my aid.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It was red and wet. And heat… So much heat, like it was cooking my brain inside my skull. A drone in my ears, a thousand times a thousand war shouts all at once devolving into a single unified note of pure violence.’

‘A thousand times a thousand?’

Usabius paused, as if not understanding my meaning, before he answered, ‘No. Eight times eight times eight times eight… Over and over and over. What does it mean?’

‘I don’t know, brother.’

Below my vantage point, Haukspeer signalled the all clear and we moved out.

The crash site below us was not as deep as the valley of skulls. The bulk of the damaged drop-ship’s fuselage was on the top of a flat ridge of dark stone, the lesser wreckage and debris strewn around it. I counted bodies amongst it, some Raven Guard and Iron Hands but mainly Salamanders. They were broken, burned things, scarcely recognisable as the proud Legion warriors they once were. Space Marines were peerless fighters, tough enough to take on and kill any enemy, any foe regardless of race or military strength. But that invulnerability had never been tested against itself, nor had it stood up to the rigours of a devastating crash from the edge of the atmosphere.

The evidence of just how vulnerable we all really were was stark, littered before me like an abject lesson in humility and the importance of the dangers of hubris.

All of the injured in the *Purgatory*’s infirmary were hard enough to bear, but this was an entirely tougher prospect to come to terms with.

Usabius knelt down by one of our fallen brothers, and tried to raise his head to see if he was still alive. When the neck lolled awkwardly and loosely to one side, I knew he was not.

‘I see no survivors,’ I whispered.

‘I found none,’ Haukspeer replied, seeming to materialise behind me as he made his presence felt.

I tried not to act startled. ‘You must teach me that one day,’ I told him, joking.

Surrounded by the dead, the Raven Guard did not see the humour. ‘We don’t have one day. Our life is measured in hours, even minutes now. We

should look inside,’ he said, and started walking towards the open cargo hold.

Usabius and I followed, my brother giving me a dark look suggesting that our travelling companion was not quite as composed as we both thought he was. Haukspeer *had* briefly lost his mind in the bone valley and there might be some semblance of that still resonating within him. Without knowing what it was that assailed us, I could not be sure. Even as an Apothecary, he would not be spared the terrible psychological damage we had all suffered as a result of surviving the massacre. To experience death on such a scale would test even a Space Marine’s mental fortitude.

Early on, in those first days when we were still scrambling for order and searching futilely for meaning, I had heard stories of legionaries even taking their own lives because the weight of anguish was too much to bear. Never with a pistol to the mouth or temple, or a blade to the torso as it was in the days of the ancient Romanii Empire, but rather by simply venturing out at night on their own and seeking out the enemy. I could think of no other word to describe it than suicidal. Those not broken in the body like Sulnar harboured other wounds, ones of the mind instead.

I watched the Raven Guard keenly as he entered through the open ramp into a realm of shadows beyond. As I followed, I exchanged a quick glance with Usabius telling him to watch the right flank as I concentrated on the left. There could be anything inside the drop-ship, anything. My eagerness to find my father, Vulkan, was almost overwhelming but I did not allow it to cloud my sense of caution. Slow, precise, methodical: that was how the primarch had taught us; that was how it would be.

From the outside the drop-ship looked perpetually, blindingly dark but once we were inside it was a different story. Lumen-strips set into the ceiling still functioned. At least some did. They flickered intermittently, reminding me of the *Purgatory*’s cargo bay, describing a scene of utter devastation. Broken pipes, exposed wires, crushed bulkheads, split doors and shattered mag-harnesses – it was like the intestines of some metal behemoth, wrecked and ruined by a massive and sudden trauma.

The impact of the crash had pushed the ventral corridor backwards, presumably when the Stormbird’s nose struck the earth. The cockpit had crumpled, split apart entirely, and the pressure of that destruction had pressed the neck back, forcing most of the troop cages into the cargo bay.

Stepping over a strut of metal spearing out from the deck where half the plating had been burned away, revealing a bent and ravaged grille beneath, I saw my first corpse.

It was another Salamanders legionary, and for a moment I fought down a fist of panic as it lodged in my throat at the thought that this might be Vulkan. It was not, and I cursed myself for the relief I felt at that.

The deeper we progressed, through snaking, spitting wires and spastic lighting, the more bodies we saw. A Raven Guard, back broken and twisted over a fallen beam; an Iron Hand crushed beneath a section of collapsed ceiling where the upper deck had come down; a Salamander, barely visible through the cloud of vapour spewing from a broken coolant pipe, half-frozen by liquid nitrogen but his true death revealed upon closer inspection as impalement by a trio of iron rebars.

For a moment I considered the reason why we did not find as many bodies at the entrance was because some predator, indigenous or otherwise, had crept in and dragged away the easy meat, unwilling to venture further for fear of what the darkness harboured. I banished the thought quickly, treating it as dangerous.

Death was multitudinous and varied. Some legionaries bore no evidence of how they had died at all, still strapped in their cages, upright but certainly dead. Carnage was everywhere. And that revelation terrified me beyond the limits of what I had been conditioned to feel.

If there were this many slain and no survivors then that could surely mean only one thing…

‘Keep going.’ Usabius was right behind me, stopped dead, and I realised belatedly that I too was not moving.

‘So much death…’ I whispered, garnering an approbative glance from Haukspeer who went ahead of us.

Scarcely a hundred metres long and it had taken us almost a half-hour just to reach this point in the cargo bay.

Usabius merely patted my shoulder. ‘It does not mean he is slain too. It’s possible that–’

Haukspeer held up his lightning claw, indicating he had found something.

I drew in close to him.

‘Movement,’ he hissed, staying as low as his damaged armour would allow before breaking off into the shadows and disappearing a moment later.

In the quietude, I heard venting pipes, the crackle of electricity and the groan of slowly shifting, cooling metal. All sounds I would expect in an empty drop-ship denuded of life. But then another sound encroached, a distant moaning. It echoed, resonating off the tight, contracted confines of the vessel, wending through corridors and spilling out into the cargo bay, barely audible until we had got close enough to hear it.

Someone injured. Alive.

I started to rush, but Usabius drew me back.

‘Be calm, brother. We do not know what we face yet.’

‘It could be Vulkan.’ I practically gasped the words, almost breathless with hope.

‘Be calm.’

Part of the ceiling had crashed in on the cargo bay, bringing slabs of metal, columns and chunks of the drop-ship’s superstructure with it. It created a sort of ragged bulkhead, a considerable blind spot that we were perched at the corner of.

A corridor of bodies, entangled in wreckage, made progress through this part of the ship difficult. We had to carefully pick our way through it, pausing every few seconds to make sure the sound was still there and our father yet lived.

I told myself it was Vulkan. I *willed* it to be so. To countenance anything else would be to give in to despair, to give up completely, and I had come too far and endured too much for that.

The route through the drop-ship became narrower still, harder to traverse. A sideways impact had crushed a section of the collapsed troop hold in the Stormbird’s flank. Through a charnel house of broken bodies and wreckage I saw the booted feet of a warrior half-obscured by a fallen beam. Haukspeer was a spectre hovering ahead of me, appearing and disappearing like a broken pict capture as the single lumen flickering overhead swung its light back and forth across the corridor. His claw was up, the signal to wait.

It took every mote of my resolve to do so, especially when I saw those booted feet move. It was a small motion, easy to miss, but we were standing so still, listening and looking so intently. In my mind’s eye, I saw the scalloped greaves of my father, the deep sea green of his armour, his cloak of cascading emerald, the fanged maw of his fearsome battle-helm, those red lenses radiating power and compassion…

Vulkan…

Enveloped in darkness, these details were impossible to discern but I heard the figure moan, and then another sound that came from above us.

The Raven Guard looked up.

I noticed that the lumen-strip was shaking more vigorously as the vibrations from something moving above fed down to it through the drop-ship's hull.

'Haukspeer, we must go to him now!'

I exchanged a glance with Usabius. We would move on Vulkan in the next few seconds.

'Wait…' hissed the Raven Guard. 'Something is not–'

The screech of rending metal cut apart the silence, as harsh artificial light strafed in from the ceiling where the drop-ship's hull had just been ripped away. Magnesium-white turned ruby-red as the blind-hunter leaned into view, squatting over the tear it had created in the roof. A discordant hoot of alarm and excitement burst from its harrowing-horn with the sudden discovery of prey.

Us.

'Kill it!' I roared, and unleashed my bolter.

Explosive shell impacts rippled across the blind-hunter's nose cone, staggering it and forcing its flaring nasal pits to contract. It reeled as I fed it another burst, rocking back on its haunches like a punch-drunk pugilist until it moved out of sight.

During the short respite, I seized Usabius by the arm.

'Go to Vulkan!' I told him urgently, 'Protect him, get him out if you can. Haukspeer and I will draw this thing off.'

There was no argument. Usabius did as I asked and ran down the shattered corridor, passing under the gaping hole in the roof, and kept on going.

'Haukspeer!' I yelled, but the Raven Guard was already coming towards me.

'We run,' he said.

'Agreed. We must draw it off, so that–'

'Just tell me this, Salamander,' he snapped, interrupting me. 'Are you my ally still? Can you do this?'

I was not sure what Haukspeer meant. Perhaps he had experienced too much in his makeshift apothecarion, seen iron-hard warriors break like brittle, rusted metal and it had shaken his faith in any soldier under pressure.

‘You can count on me, brother,’ I assured him, just as the red lamps of the blind-hunter returned. ‘To the end.’

Haukspeer cast a quick glance over his shoulder and gestured to a tightly packed corridor that broke off from the cargo bay. ‘This way.’

I went after him, the angry bleat of the harrowing-horn resounding in my ears.

Heat pressed against my back in a sudden, prickling pressure wave. As well as their claws, the Dark Mechanicum had fashioned the blind-hunters many weapons. An underslung flame unit was tailored for cleansing, and I thought I had seen the glint of two shoulder mounts in the glimpse I caught of the monster in the muzzle flare of my bolter.

Could be autocannons; possibly something else, something worse. I knew some of the walkers carried webbers, filled with scything monofilament; others, more debilitating radiation weaponry. Hard-armoured, ceramite over-carapace concealing some unknown biological horror beneath, the blind-hunters were part organic, part machine and almost invulnerable to conventional weapons. As Haukspeer and I rushed through the cluttered cargo bay, tripping over bodies, snagging and scraping our armour on the half-destroyed ship, I wished dearly that I had something more potent than a boltgun.

After the gout of flame failed to kill us, the blind-hunter did not pursue. It could not, the confines of the crashed Stormbird were too tight. Instead, it scurried across the roof. I heard its talons raking gouges in the hull as it tracked us with its sensors. Named blind-hunters, the walkers were actually far from sightless. Through painful and often fatal experience, we had learned the search lamps they used contained some kind of bio-sweep and heat-tracking wave. I did not know why the beams switched from white to red, but I suspected it was some genetic quirk from the walkers’ organic component. None of it mattered now. The only significant fact was that no legionary on foot had ever outrun one and encounters with the hunters could only end in death for the walker or its prey. To my knowledge, the former had yet to come to pass. Our odds of survival, then, were extremely narrow.

I felt the last dark grains in my hourglass slipping towards the neck. Soon they would be spent, so I vowed that I would give Usabius enough time to get Vulkan out and to safety. If my life meant nothing else, it would at least mean that.

Haukspeer halted at the edge of the corridor, and was looking up.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked. ‘We need to get it to follow us. If we allow it to catch–’

‘Too late. Listen,’ he said, pointing to the ceiling with one of his talons.

I frowned. ‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘That’s the point,’ replied the Raven Guard. ‘It’s stopped.’

Following his gaze, I whispered, ‘Above us?’

Haukspeer nodded slowly, stepping back as I raised my bolter.

The likelihood of my shots penetrating through the ragged shreds of the ceiling was extremely small but I was not trying to hit it, I was trying to goad it.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Haukspeer unclip a frag grenade from his belt.

‘Ready.’ I did not wait for an answer and squeezed the trigger.

Mass-reactives pummelled the ceiling, taking out sections of shattered metal and exposing the numerous fractures in the hull. A huge chunk of pipes, the remains of the upper deck and scorched armour-plating crashed down in a deluge. The blind-hunter fell with it, surprised when its footing suddenly gave way beneath it. Half-collapsed on one reverse-jointed knee, it leered over at me with its crimson search lamps. I allowed a bellow from its harrowing-horn before I fired another burst. This time I raked its underslung arsenal, puncturing the flamer’s tank and sending roaring promethium over its lozenge-shaped body in an incendiary wave.

Some of the conflagration struck me too, my armour’s internal temperature gauge spiking then redlining on my retinal lens display. I ignored it. To let up now, to hesitate or falter for an instant, was to die.

‘Pour it on!’ I cried, hoping Haukspeer had heard me.

A deafening boom followed by a dense pressure burst confirmed he had. The ground fell away beneath me, or rather I was lifted above it as the grenade blast took me off my feet and smashed me into a broken troop cage. Fighting my way free from a pile of bodies, I fired off a snap shot. One-handed, my aim was poor but in the resulting flash I saw Haukspeer facing off against the monster, his lightning claw flaring like a defiant torch against the darkness.

The blind-hunter was wreathed in fire that was slowly dying out. It had a dent in its carapace and several pieces of shrapnel embedded in it went deep. Wounded but far from immobilised, the flame unit wrecked but its remaining

arsenal intact, the walker had lost little battle efficacy. As Haukspeer threw himself at it, one of the blind-hunter's shoulder mounts hummed into life.

I was wrong. They were not autocannons. Solid-shot would have been merciful compared to what happened next. A heat-hazing melta beam stabbed from the blind-hunter's left shoulder, the wide dispersal making it tough to dodge. Haukspeer tried but the edge of the pulsing microwaves hit him on his right side, cruel given that his left was already a ruin. His lightning claw withered and sloughed away, taking most of his remaining arm with it. The attack faltered in a scream of the Raven Guard's agony. He fell, rolled, tumbled until he slumped in a throbbing heap. As he raised his head, still trying to fight, the blind-hunter's second weapon cycled into action.

A gobbet of monofilament spat from the fluted muzzle of a webber, expanding into a net of lethal, glistening crystal. Instinct, flaring hot nerve endings, made Haukspeer struggle as he was pinned by the web. Any infinitesimal movement, breathing, a muscle spasm, even blinking, would make the web contract. Suffocation through extreme pressure on the lungs and larynx would usually kill the victim, but Haukspeer was a legionary and his fortitude transcended that of a mortal man. His fate was the razor edges of the net, its savage teeth so sharp, so narrow that they were invisible to the naked eye, even if their effects were not.

I averted my gaze as the Raven Guard was denatured in his armour, only dimly aware I was still firing and my bolter had just *chanked* empty. Its abrupt silence was filled instantly with the last of Haukspeer's screaming. I thought I heard defiance and rage in his last cry, and took a measure of selfish pride in that.

Tossing my useless bolter aside, I drew my chainblade. 'Come here, you bastard…'

Turning slowly, framed in the ambient light from the gaping hole in the roof, the blind-hunter fixed its red lamps on me. Twin battle-claws extended from beneath its torso, unfolding with a strange, syncopated motion. It snapped each of its pincers once, racking its shoulder mounts back to a dormant position as it recognised an easy kill.

I had never seen malice expressed by a machine before. Not until that moment.

The short bleat from its harrowing-horn purred almost like a sadistic laugh.

‘Vulkan’s fire beats in my breast…’ I began, preparing to make my stand as the last of the dark sand ran out.

A sharp whine from above made me squint, hurting my ears even inside the relative protection of my helmet. There was a brief flash, like a nova flare, before a beam of coruscating energy lanced the blind-hunter square in the torso. Light pierced metal, terrible and penetrating. Unstoppable.

The purr became a hacking, vibrating cough as the hunter twisted against the beam’s impact. Shoulder mounts swung desperately into position, darting back and forth in search of an aggressor, but it was too late. The blind-hunter’s organic components were dead, or close to death. Its legs buckled, torso smouldering from the wound.

I heard a low hum of a capacitor building back up to power before a second beam strafed the shadows, clipping the hunter’s nose cone and burning off its nasal pits. I located the firer; a legionary silhouette, legs braced with a shoulder-slung cannon. The beam came from the weapon he carried, and though it flickered with intermittent energy it was potent. Armour that had defied my bolter’s shells capitulated against the conversion beamer, and in that moment of revelation I knew the identity of my saviour.

As the hunter finally slumped into a ruin of sundered metal and scorched organic matter, the legionary put up his cannon and called down to me. His voice resonated around the debris-strewn chamber, and was made colder, more mechanistic for that.

‘Are you injured, brother?’

‘No, Ironwrought,’ I replied to Erasmus Ruuman, ‘but Haukspeer is dead.’

Ruuman paused as if weighing up the appropriate response.

In the end his choice was fitting.

‘That is a great loss to his Legion.’

‘He died with honour,’ I said, but deliberately did not look at the remains of Haukspeer’s corpse. By now the razor web would have made a mess of him. There would be little to see and I had no desire to remember a noble warrior and friend that way.

‘Don’t come down here,’ I warned Ruuman. ‘Footing is treacherous. Many of the slain died poor deaths in here, brother.’

‘I have bio-scanned the ship,’ the Ironwrought replied, ‘and detected a single additional life sign, but it’s weak.’

‘As did we. I’m going to him now.’

‘Very well. I’ll cross via the roof,’ said Ruuman. ‘Meet me at the exit to the troop hold.’

‘What exit?’ Since being in the drop-ship I had yet to see one.

‘It’s a gaping tear in the hull. You’ll know it when you see it.’

I was about to head out, back into the dark where I hoped Usabius and my primarch were waiting, when I glanced up.

‘Ruuman, I don’t know how and why you got here but I am in your debt for saving my life.’

‘I’ll explain on the other side of the ship,’ the Ironwrought replied, and then he was gone from my sight.

Heart pounding, as much from anticipation as adrenaline, I rushed back through the ship to the corridor where we had found the survivor.

‘I hope you are soaring free now, my friend,’ I muttered to the shadows as I left.

Usabius was not there. He had moved off somewhere else, and was no longer waiting. The booted feet of the survivor were, but my battle-brother was absent. For a moment I considered the worst had happened, that Usabius was dead and the survivor as well. A brief vision filled my mind of the blind-hunter killing them first before it caught up to us. Not that it had had enough time to do that, but my senses were not entirely reliable of late. Perhaps it was longer than I had originally thought. Panic overtaking my limbs, filling them with nervous energy, I ran.

Only when I closed on the survivor did I check myself, slow and finally stop.

It was not Vulkan. It was not even a Salamander.

Armoured in magenta with a broken aquila adorning his breastplate, the survivor was not even an ally.

Slumped against the half-crushed confines of a detention cell wall, flecked with his own blood, was one of Fulgrim’s sons. Emperor’s Children. A prisoner. My enemy.

Usabius must have seen him too, and hope kindled that he still lived.

My enemy groaned. His booted feet were moving but only attached to his torso by the scantest of threads. Most of his left side was crushed too, the armour dented and split. Fulgrim’s warriors were slaves to perfection, and as I listened to the one before me groan I wondered if it was not pain but the fact that he was in such poor condition that ailed him.

‘Who are you?’ I demanded, approaching slowly with my chainblade out in front.

An eye opened. Just one; the other was bruised shut. The Emperor’s Children legionary turned his head, an agonising motion I assumed but he appeared to revel in it.

‘Salamander…?’ he rasped, smiling through red-rimmed teeth. ‘Is your kind still alive?’ He found that amusing until I crouched down to his level and smashed my fist into his plastron. It was a light blow, I did not want to kill him yet, but fresh cracks still webbed the mocking eagle device he wore.

‘Answer the question, traitor,’ I growled, trying to remain calm.

Spitting up a gobbet of blood, the warrior drew in enough breath to speak.

‘Lorimarr.’

He attempted to laugh but pulled up short as a hacking cough took over. Blood spittle flecked the ruins of his plastron but could barely be discerned amongst the rest of the damage.

‘Where is Usabius?’ I asked, stepping closer, acutely aware of Ruuman’s heavy footfalls on the roof overhead.

‘Who?’ Lorimarr asked. ‘You are the first soul I have seen.’

‘Don’t lie to me.’ I wanted to give him a taste of my blade but saw the futility of torture at once. This cur would only enjoy it. ‘The warrior I came into this ship with, another Salamanders legionary like me. Where is he?’

‘There was no one else before you.’

‘Liar!’ I brandished my blade, let him see the chained teeth and imagine them ripping into his flesh. If it would yield the truth, I would maim the traitor just as he had maimed countless numbers of my battle-brothers.

Lorimarr forced a chuckle, undermining my menace. ‘What can you do except kill me?’ he said. ‘No blade will loosen my tongue. There is nothing left to threaten me with. Besides,’ he added, growing serious, ‘I am not lying. You are the first soul I’ve seen,’ he repeated, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, ‘but not that I’ve heard. They died slow, your kin… crying out for their father.’

My patience at its limit, I was about to strike him and end his miserable life when a voice said, ‘Brother…’

I turned and at the end of the corridor I saw Usabius shrouded in shadow.

‘I thought you were de–’

‘This way,’ he said sombrely and walked off as if to lead me.

Lorimarr followed my gaze into the darkness and when he looked back at me started to laugh uncontrollably.

‘Delicious,’ he wheezed through his tears, his pain and his pleasure. ‘Exquisite.’ His mania was killing him, but I doubted that he cared.

I ignored the wretch, and went after Usabius.

Ruuman was right about the exit to the troop hold, but when I passed through the ragged portal he was not there to meet me. Instead I saw Usabius, waiting less than fifty metres from the drop-ship.

He was standing stock still with his back to me, and looking at something lodged in the dark sand.

As I approached him, I tried to block out the insane laughter echoing from inside the drop-ship, willing Lorimarr to die at the same time.

‘I wanted to kill him too,’ Usabius told me, the edges of something in front of him just coming into view over his shoulder.

‘Why didn’t you?’ I asked, realising I was looking at a battle-helm partially buried in the Isstvan earth.

‘Because I found this.’

Ornate beyond reckoning, so finely and perfectly crafted it brought tears to my eyes just to see it, I realised what it was that had enraptured my brother.

Before us lay the battle-helm of a primarch, the battle-helm of Vulkan.

For a brief, macabre moment I hoped there would not be a head inside it, but as I stooped to retrieve it, I realised there was no blood, no evidence of injury of any kind or even a struggle.

It was just a beautiful battle-helm, lying incongruously, discarded in the dirt.

My fingers trembled as I went to touch it, and I could almost feel the resonance of my father emanating from its very fire-tempered metal. Vulkan’s hands had crafted this piece of armour and a measure of his presence and power still imbued it. I saw a face in its fearsomely wrought visage, in the gem-like retinal lenses, the gilded maw, the flat snout. It was Vulkan’s, the face I had seen him wear on the battlefield time and again, his war face, and it chilled me to look upon it now, empty of life. Though it must have been lying in the sand for many hours, even days, the helmet was still warm as if it had just been fresh-forged. Even through the ceramite of my gauntlet, I felt its heat. It banished the cold and I took strength from it.

Mild despair followed in the wake of my initial elation. As I carefully mag-locked Vulkan's war-helm to my belt, I realised why Usabius had not picked it up.

Rising, I said, 'Our primarch would not have left his battle-helm here willingly. And if his body is not here, and there is no evidence of his death then…' I turned.

'Then he has been captured by the enemy, and is somewhere else,' Usabius concluded.

'How will we find him?'

The slow shake of Usabius's head only increased my sense of defeat.

'I don't know, Ra'stan. The drop-ship was our compass. Without it, we have no bearing, nothing to guide us. Without it, we are…'

'Lost, brother,' I told him.

Ruuman announced his presence with the *clank* of his heavy footfalls on the roof of the drop-ship. The Ironwrought had taken his time. When I saw the magnoculars in his hand, I realised why.

'Traitors are moving,' he said, his iron voice ringing across the space between us. '*Purgatory* is destroyed.'

My jaw stiffened as I clenched my teeth.

What was left to us now except for petty retribution?

'We have one of them inside the ship,' I said, my meaning obvious.

Ruuman's gaze shifted down a fraction as he saw the battle-helm clamped to my belt.

'I think vengeance would be understandable.' The Ironwrought nodded, as if in approval of what I had decided to do. 'Be quick with it,' he added, turning away. 'I will keep a watch.'

With Usabius behind me, I stalked back to the ship.

Lorimarr was waiting for us. He rested his head against the back of his broken cell, pieces of his shattered plastron rising and falling with the legionary's shallow breathing.

'I am dead anyway,' he hissed to the darkness, not bothering to open his eye this time. Blood was eking from the left corner of his mouth, so too from his nose and ear.

I wanted to destroy him, to exact some measure of pain from this traitor as if it would account for all the death and agony he and his kind had inflicted upon us. Perhaps if we had still been in the valley of bones, I would have, but the killing rage was gone and only pity and self-pity remained.

‘But you are in far greater agony than me,’ said Lorimarr, opening his eye to stare at me and then the battle-helm I carried. ‘Aren’t you, Salamander?’

I wanted to smack the supercilious smile off his face.

‘Kill him,’ said Usabius.

‘In cold blood?’ I replied, my wrath ebbing. ‘We would be no better than them.’

Lorimarr laughed again.

‘You really are broken, aren’t you?’ he said to me.

I glared down at him disdainfully. ‘I think you are the one smashed up, absent your legs, *brother*.’

Snorting derisively, Lorimarr replied, ‘I know.’

‘What?’

The traitor’s eye narrowed. ‘I know,’ he repeated.

‘Speak plainly,’ I warned him.

‘What you seek,’ he said.

‘Kill him, right now!’ Usabius snarled.

I turned to him saying, ‘Wait! Just wait…’ before looking back at our prisoner. I showed him the battle-helm. ‘This? Is this what you mean?’

Lorimarr inclined his head, ever so slowly.

I sneered, fighting down hope and revulsion in the same ambivalent emotional cocktail.

‘Why would you help us?’

‘He’s lying,’ Usabius insisted and took a forward step when I put up my arm to stop him advancing further.

‘Wait.’

I turned my attention back to Lorimarr, crouching down at his eye level.

‘No,’ I said, reading the cruelty there, ‘he isn’t. You *want* us to go after him. You want to give us hope.’

‘It is false, brother!’

I shrugged off Usabius’s hand on my shoulder, watching Lorimarr’s eye flick back and forth between us, his smile broadening as it did so.

‘Tell me,’ I demanded. ‘I’ll make it quick.’

‘You have nothing to offer me, Salamander. But I will give *you* a gift…’ He grunted, leaning forward and reaching out with his hand.

I flinched, suspecting an attack, but saw that the Emperor’s Children warrior was unarmed and missing two fingers. He stretched towards me with the remaining digits as if about to perform some kind of benediction.

‘Don’t let him touch you!’ Usabius snapped, but I was already leaning in, closing my eyes…

Too late, I realised the danger I was in.

Lorimarr was a psyker and I a slave to his malicious will.

As his fingers touched my battle-helm, just the lightest caress of metal against metal, I was bombarded with a host of painful images.

Fire… An endless conflagration and the destruction of a hundred battle tanks.

A roar of anger, a curse spat from a primarch’s lips in accusation of a brother.

Pain and light, so hot it seared the very flesh off my skeleton and turned my bones to ash.

I pulled away from Lorimarr’s touch, my ears ringing and a trickle of blood seeping from the corner of my mouth. I wiped it away, about to kill the traitor when I saw that the Emperor’s Children legionary’s eye was open and unblinking. In his last act of attempted murder, he had ended himself.

‘*Ra’stan…*’

The voice sounded dim, the edges of my sight still hazed, and odd after-images related to my earlier visions assailed me like pieces of a broken kaleidoscope.

‘Ra’stan, are you hurt?’

Usabius was holding me up. Without his intervention I would have fallen, such was the intensity of Lorimarr’s psychic assault.

I nodded, my senses returning.

‘He tried to kill you,’ he added, letting me go so I could support myself.

‘A Librarian…’

‘More like a sorcerer, I think, but yes.’

‘I should not have survived that attack,’ I said, facing my brother. ‘How could I?’

‘I don’t know, but you did. Vulkan protects even his wayward sons.’

‘So we might carry on with our mission?’

I did not believe that, but decided not to question the distant providence that had kept me alive. For now, it was enough to know that Lorimarr had been thwarted and he was left for whatever carrion feeders haunted the skies of this place.

‘I saw something,’ I told Usabius as the two of us stood before the slumped body of the traitor. ‘I suspect it was a fragment of what this

legionary knew.’

‘Beware such falsehoods, Ra’stan, especially when given by a deceitful messenger.’

‘It did not feel false. I don’t think he meant for me to see it. I think he was telling the truth.’

Ruuman’s booted feet hammering on the roof above us returned, cutting our debate short.

Usabius gave me a warning look, but I was convinced.

‘I know, brother,’ I whispered, as if to speak it louder would make the visions disappear, their lodestar blink out.

With the *clank* of his heavy armour, the Ironwrought jumped down from the roof of the drop-ship and landed with his back to me. He arose swiftly, bionics whirring, and fixed me with a hard glare as he turned.

‘We’re out of time. The war party is coming back, sky-hunters leading the vanguard.’

Jetbikes, incredibly swift and deadly to a small party like ours. I had seen them operating in packs out on the plains, using their superior speed to encircle and then execute isolated groups of survivors. At Ruuman’s mention of them, a bleak memory resurfaced of one of my brothers being dragged to his death, chains hooked to his flesh on the back of a jetbike while its rider laughed at the grim spectacle.

Some rode solo too, and these scouts could be just as deadly. If spotted by one, it would be almost impossible to silence the outrider without drawing unwelcome attention. If that happened then the vultures would flock to the feast with us as their carrion meat.

The appearance of the sky-hunters was therefore problematic.

The Ironwrought asked, ‘Did you get what you needed?’

‘Yes. A map of sorts,’ I said, tapping my battle-helm with my finger.

Ruuman stared, waiting for more.

So I gave him it. ‘I know,’ I said. ‘I know where they took Vulkan.’

Deciphering a clear image from the painful mental assault Lorimarr had inflicted on me was not easy. Through the fire, and the agony and the light, I saw a cave. On the surface, it was a fairly nondescript – even ubiquitous – landmark on the Isstvan plains where there were many crevices and chasms. However, this one carried a mark. It was a star with eight points and to see it, even in my mind’s eye, made my stomach tighten and my tongue itch. The

sensation was akin to that which we had felt in the valley of bones, so I knew it must be significant.

The suggestion of a craven altar, a ritual knife with the infernal power to cut through reality itself, forced its way into my consciousness and I suddenly dreaded what had become of my father. It had been prepared for him this place, this cave; that much I *knew*.

And from our vantage point, standing as we had in Tarkan's eyrie on the *Purgatory*, I had seen it. Then it had just been a shape, another lumpen blister in a black desert studded with gibbets, pyres and death-pits. Now it was a beacon, calling me to him.

From the details of the hololithic map I studied during Sulnar's briefing, I remembered the relative position of the cave to the *Purgatory* and by extrapolation the position of Vulkan's crashed drop-ship.

I found the cave and led us to it, that part was easy. Getting to it across an encampment thronged with Iron Warriors was not.

Ruuman lowered the scopes and scowled. The bionics in his face growled with the effort.

'I can see no route through them.'

A hot wind was blowing in from the north, disturbing squalls of ash that painted our armour in murky grey. I imagined the heat was coming off the *Purgatory* and the bones of the poor souls we had left there to burn. Ruuman had not said much about why he had left. Apparently, Sulnar had sent him. Perhaps Tarkan had seen what was coming and the imminent threat had made the lieutenant commander send reinforcements? Perhaps the Ironwrought had simply decided it was time to leave? Either way, he had reached us somehow and now here we were, contemplating another desperate act.

We had taken up a position sheltering behind a cluster of rocks, slightly elevated above the desert floor on a shelf of obsidian and surveying the majority of the encampment.

Warriors encircled small fires, talking, cleaning their weapons, sharpening knives. Some sat alone, staring catatonically into the darkness. Others sat on the hulls of their battle tanks, hunched over with their weapons held casually at ease. The vehicles formed a loose laager within which the Iron Warriors had pitched tents and made their fires. I suspected they did so to keep whatever dogs were also prowling the night at bay. Of all the murderous thugs left behind to cleanse Isstvan V, only the sons of Perturabo acted as if

they were not also part of the Warmaster's chaff. Primarchs had left behind the very worst and most volatile of their warriors, mad dogs in every sense, for this dirty job. The IV Legion had never done anything *but* the dirty jobs and so there was no distinction to make. It also meant they were more ordered and less unpredictable than their wilder brethren. If they had dug in, it was likely they would not strike camp until ordered to by Perturabo, and that would only happen when we were all dead.

Some of the sand had been restored to the hourglass, but it was dwindling perilously close to expiry again.

'Must be over fifty warriors,' breathed Usabius.

'I count almost a hundred,' I replied.

Ruuman nodded. 'We must thin their ranks,' he said, 'stretch them so we can slip through their pickets without detection.'

I took a long hard look at the encampment, the relative position of the warriors, the scouts, watch points, concentrations of armour and men. And then I looked at the cave and how it was almost surrounded, although the troops there did not act like guards or as if they were even aware of its significance. We had just been unlucky.

'Impossible,' I said, and sank back down behind cover.

Ruuman followed me.

'Chances of operational success are slim,' he admitted. 'I might be able to punch a hole through their armour with this.' He patted the conversion beamer that was slung over his shoulder.

I shook my head. 'They would strafe this ridge with every heavy cannon they had. We would be dust within seconds, another violent memory just like the rest of our kin.'

'There must be a gap in their patrols, a weakness in the net we can exploit. Perhaps if we just wait…' said Usabius.

'We cannot wait.' I gestured to the night skyline as it purpled and reddened on the distant horizon. 'Dawn is not far off and in the open as we are, we will be seen.'

As if to emphasise the danger, the low drone of a sky-hunter cut into our discussion, zipping by our position at speed.

'How long do you think it will be before one of those jetbikers catches us in these rocks?' I asked.

'Doing nothing is certain death,' Ruuman answered.

'Stepping out now yields the same results, Ironwrought,' said Usabius.

Ruuman seemed not to hear him; his gaze was on the enemy.

After a few seconds when he still did not speak, I asked, ‘What is it?’

‘They are striking camp.’

I rushed to peek over the edge of the rocks. Even without the scopes, I could tell that the Ironwrought was right.

Fires were being doused, tents collapsed and packed away. Officers barked orders and tank crews leapt off the hulls of their vehicles and began making ready. The Iron Warriors were preparing to mobilise again.

‘Orders?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Ruuman, ‘something has come down the chain of command. Reacting to another threat?’ he wondered out loud.

‘Does it matter?’

He turned to face me. ‘Only if we are that threat.’

But it did not appear that way.

On the horizon a red line flashed across the landscape, heralding another fiery sunrise. As I watched, the shadows began to creep away from the encroaching light, the darkness releasing us from its grasp and thrusting us screaming into the day.

‘How long before the dawn?’ I asked, my gaze alternating between the rising sun and the dissipating encampment of our enemies.

‘Minutes,’ Ruuman calculated.

‘And the camp?’ I already knew the answer – minutes, just the same.

It was at least four hundred metres from our position to the threshold of the cave. There was some natural cover, scattered rocks, minor defiles, the remnants of whatever the Iron Warriors left behind.

The dawn was coming… Too fast.

‘We have to go now,’ I said urgently.

Usabius was up on his feet, head above the rocks, ready to move too.

Ruuman clutched my shoulder, forced me down.

‘You’ll be seen. Wait a little longer.’

Through the blood pounding in my ears, I heard the low drone of the circling sky-hunter again, whipping by us, still ignorant of our presence.

The dawn faded, the harsh light dissolving back into blackness and leaving an eldritch gloaming in its wake.

I turned, confused, heart drumming.

‘Not the dawn…’ gasped Usabius, sinking down again, mercifully unseen by the scouts and sentries.

The Iron Warriors were still rolling out, slow and methodically, easing into column with heavy tanks to the front and rear, bracketing the march.

I realised why they had been ordered to move and what I had seen in place of a true dawn.

‘Nuclear sunrise,’ said Ruuman, echoing my thoughts. ‘The traitors have deployed atomics of some minor magnitude. The wind will bring the fallout this way.’

‘They’re moving because of the radiation?’

‘Yes.’

‘Which means…’

‘It will be flooding this region, with us still in it.’

I shook my head, unwilling to be dissuaded by such a minor threat.

‘It won’t kill us,’ I said.

‘Not immediately, no.’

Below us, the Iron Warriors were shackling heavy gun carriages to their Rhinos and Spartans. I saw Rapiers, mole-mortars, several autocannons. It would take time to move all of that arms and armour. The laager was breaking apart slowly. Mounted, they could ride ahead of the storm of fallout. We could not.

‘If Vulkan is down there, we must rescue him,’ I said adamantly.

‘*If*?’ Ruuman posited. ‘So you admit he might not be in that cave?’

‘I…’ I looked to Usabius, but his attention was fixated on the encampment. ‘Nothing is certain, Ruuman. But if there is even a chance that–’

‘Have you considered not going down there?’

I glared at the Ironwrought, suppressing an instinctive violent urge to do him harm for what he was suggesting.

‘Abandon him? Forswear everything we have pledged?’

‘*We* have pledged?’ Ruuman challenged. ‘Do you speak for your Legion now, Ra’stan of the Salamanders?’

‘Us,’ I snapped, gesturing to Usabius.

Ruuman looked over to him and then looked back.

‘Sulnar did not send me to reinforce you,’ he said. ‘I was meant to dissuade you, to bring you back. It never sat well with the lieutenant commander that you and Haukspeer left on this foolhardy mission.’

‘A fool’s hope is better than no hope,’ I hissed, keeping my voice down, though the Iron Warriors could not have heard us above the growl of their

tanks manoeuvring and grinding into position. ‘Vulkan lives! He lives, and we have a chance to help him.’ I breathed deep, marshalling my anger and my resolve, until I found a measure of calm. ‘*Help us*,’ I pleaded. ‘There is nothing left to go back to now. If you could have spared Lord Manus his fate, you would have. If you were gifted a chance to save his life–’

‘I would have taken it,’ said Ruuman with cold, iron-hard pragmatism. ‘But my primarch is dead, and you have the means now of knowing the fate of yours.’ He nodded to the battle-helm mag-locked to my belt. Vulkan’s helm, its empty retinal lenses staring blankly.

The primarch was physically larger than any of his legionaries but not so massive that I could not interface with whatever systems still functioned in this piece of armour I bore like a sacred relic.

Our battle-helms contained a visual feed. It recorded what we saw, allowing us to utilise the data strategically for later debrief, or immediately for tactical adaptation and deployment. The feed could be relayed to other battle-brothers, between company officers or even battalions. It was useful, and provided a shared visual experience, crucial for training or the dissemination of vital military intelligence.

I had never considered what a primarch’s visual feed might reveal. I almost dared not look through Vulkan’s eyes for fear of what I might see. For what was seen could never be *unseen*.

‘I wish this burden had not fallen to me,’ I said to Usabius, but knew deep down that I had to be the one to do this.

A shameful part of me willed the battle-helm to be broken, for the link to malfunction and an empty glassy vista to greet me.

Disengaging the locking clamps, I removed my own helm and set it down on a nearby rock. My fingers were trembling. I looked to Usabius, to try and gauge his mood, but he had not moved from staring at the tanks.

Vulkan’s battle-helm came free with a low hum of magnetism and the light *chink* of metal touching metal. I raised it up, like it was a crown and I its unworthy incumbent. It was heavy, heavier than I realised, heavier than it had been when I had first retrieved it from the sand. I knew it was the weight of imminent revelation, the gravity of a hard and uncomfortable truth that encumbered me.

‘Will this even work?’ I breathed. It was significantly larger than my own battle-helm, and I could only rest it over my head whilst holding it aloft and in place. ‘Feels like a trespass…’

‘I can help make the interface,’ Ruuman replied, ‘strip some of the cabling out, hard-wire the connections. If it still functions, you’ll be able to access the visual feed.’

‘This is a relic, I shouldn’t be doing this.’

‘It’s only a relic if Vulkan is already dead and this the last physical part of him.’

I tried not to countenance that possibility and donned the primarch’s battle-helm, bracing myself for his last sights before he and it were separated.

Ruuman was working with his tools. It was hard not to think of his modifications as sacrilegious, but we lived in an age of enlightenment, where faith and religion were deemed heretical. I tried not to dwell too long on the irony of that. Much of my established worldview had been shaken through the ordeal of Isstvan. Lesser men would have crumbled in the face of such utter horror, as their concept of reality was brutally unpinned and wrenched cruelly apart.

But we were not lesser men; we were legionaries. So we endured.

‘Nothing, I can see nothing,’ I said, ashamed at the sound of relief in my voice. ‘It’s just darkness in here. The systems are not working.’

‘A moment,’ muttered Ruuman. I could hear the sky-hunter whir past us again and the rumble of armour farther away as the encampment dissembled.

Why did I need proof of Vulkan’s fate? Why could I not just trust in belief, the faith that he lived and was waiting for our aid?

I wanted to throw off the battle-helm, to defy Ruuman’s logic, to storm into the encampment and rescue my father. In my dreams, this was how it played out. All the doubt, all the madness and uncertainty burned away in his refulgent presence. Vulkan was glorious, and he would smite these traitors from the face of this black world before returning to the stars, and with his brothers by his side smash the Warmaster from his usurper’s throne and–

A dull glow suffused the interior of the battle-helm, revealing small details of its inner surface in crimson monochrome. In my peripheral vision I could see where Ruuman had snaked wires and hard connection points to the interfaces of my own armour’s gorget. Aligning my eyes as best I could with the retinal lenses, I blink-clicked to activate the visual feed.

Static reigned at first, a red, crackling haze that made me think the lenses were damaged and any image capture unreadable. It only lasted for a few

moments before an all too familiar scene resolved…

Walking up a dark ridge of black, volcanic sand. The air is blistered by bolter fire, a vast crescendo of unending muzzle flares. Larger explosions flash in the distance, pluming smoke and fire. A wash of earth and blood sprays across his eye line.

There was no audio. Evidently, that facility had been damaged. But I could see well enough… and imagine the noise.

Through the smoke, the snow that has begun inexplicably to fall, a phalanx of iron-armoured legionaries is revealed. Their blank and faceless war-helms show no pity, no sign of reluctance. They are ranked up in a firing line, intent on killing us. Behind them loom the larger forms of tanks…

Vulkan raises his gauntlet and a spit of flame drives the traitors back up the hill. They collide with the advancing armour, crushed under the relentless tracks of their own tanks. Those that stand their ground are engulfed in a conflagration so intense that their power armour is no defence against it. Slowly collapsing silhouettes, brown and hazed in the heat, wither before his drake fire. Flesh and bone become ash, blown from scorched armour by the wind.

Any lingering bond of fraternity he might feel does not show. He is running, the Pyre Guard just behind him, eating up the metres of the hillside until he crests the summit. Hard shells ricochet off his armour, gnat-bites trying to breach a fortress wall. A rocket tube's explosive payload throws off light and kinetic force but he is unbowed and stalwart.

A clutch of desperate warriors hurl themselves at him, chain-glaives burring. Dawnbringer *slips into his grasp and he swings. Once. Four Iron Warriors are launched skywards, their bodies broken. Insanely courageous or blatantly stupid, three more wade in despite the ruin they had just seen made of their comrades.*

Like the hammer of a god, Vulkan smites them. A breastplate is split in two, the chest caved, ribs and innards exposed. A shoulder is battered, the guard giving way with the same resistance as parchment. A battle-helm is crushed, the head within pulped by a giant, gauntleted fist.

Undaunted, the Iron Warriors maintain their dogged but failing defence. It is as if they don't know the meaning of surrender or defeat.

Neither does Vulkan, and the killing continues until the Pyre Guard catch up and vanquish the rest, clearing a path to the armour…

Vulkan reaches the first of the battle tanks, a Demolisher that the primarch lifts with his bare hands and turns over. Dawnbringer *is back in his mailed fist a moment later and he uses it to punch a hole through the hull of a second vehicle. Tearing open the front armour with his fingers he wrenches out the crew within as they pepper him with ineffectual pistol fire.*

He tosses them out like they are refuse, limbs flailing, and lets his inner circle warriors put them to the blade before they fill the tank with grenades.

Vulkan is already moving, the back of the Demolisher he's just left behind blowing out in a plume of fire, smoke and shrapnel. Green-armoured Salamanders advance with him on either side of the primarch. The battle is a mess of close-quarters combat and snap-fire.

A figure becomes visible in the distance, across a battle line of Earthshakers. Vulkan is fixated on him, his gaze unwavering like a homing missile. His iron brother is laughing, beckoning him on. A tank rolls into Vulkan's path and he heaves it aside with his shoulder. Another he seizes by its crude dozer blade, upends it in his rage. He shakes, roaring an accusation at the Lord of Iron who is still too far away to strike…

…then looks up at a stream of missiles bursting from their batteries on contrails of nova-bright fire. It takes a few seconds for the barrage to hit. Vulkan doesn't stop shouting until the flash of magnesium-white fills his vision and his world goes dark.

Crackling white noise returned, the end of the feed. I stared into it, dumbstruck, unable to process the fact I had very probably just witnessed my primarch's demise.

'Brother…?' Barely louder than a whisper, Usabius's voice brought me around. 'What did you see?'

'Death,' I uttered, trying to lift the battle-helm but finding it snagged by the cables coupling it to my armour. 'Get it off,' I snapped. 'Get it off!'

'Hold on,' said Ruuman, and I was vaguely aware of him disconnecting the makeshift interface. When he was done, I wrenched the helmet free and set it down as if scalded by its touch and wary of its presence.

I did not need to tell Ruuman what I had seen. He could tell by the look on my face.

'It is over then?' he asked.

'Vulkan lives…' I gasped, desperately, defiantly, deluded. 'He must.'

Usabius was still at the edge of the rocks, keeping watch on the encampment, and offered no support.

The droning sky-hunter made its fourth pass.

‘It’s getting closer,’ said Ruuman. ‘The rider suspects he has found something in the rocks but has yet to actually locate it.’

‘A vanguard has arrived to lead the column out,’ uttered Usabius. I followed his pointing finger, still reeling from what I had just witnessed, and saw two sky-hunters accelerate into the rapidly diminishing encampment and take up point positions at the head of the Iron Warriors. The riders were half-armoured and went without helms or vambraces. They wore visors instead, gauntlets torquing the horned handlebars of their mounts. Fumes and smoke belched from thick exhaust ports. Low-riding, leaning back, they laughed and bellowed at one another. Perhaps the sons of Perturabo had some madmen in their ranks after all.

At last they were leaving. I fought hard to make that fact matter, to not have the victory of it obliterated by the stark evidence of what I had seen through Vulkan’s eyes.

Ruuman was watching the Iron Warriors too.

‘Two sky-hunters means a third is missing. Our creeping shadow, I would reckon.’

‘He lives,’ I told the Ironwrought, my gaze panning across the struck camp to the cave mouth. ‘Vulkan lives.’

‘You said yourself, legionary, that he does not.’

‘The helm was not where he fell,’ I said, seizing on an unlikely truth. ‘It means he could have survived, picked it up.’

‘There was nothing left of that feed,’ asserted Ruuman. ‘He’s dead, Ra’stan. Accept it, so that we might leave here and live a little longer.’

‘No.’

A true dawn was rising, the sun of Isstvan breaching the hills and banishing the shadows. It could not disperse the radiation storm bearing down on us from the north, but that hardly mattered now.

I rose to my feet, joining Usabius at the edge of the rocks.

Below us, the armoured column was rolling out.

‘We have to go now, for certain this time,’ I said, and Usabius nodded.

‘That way lies death,’ said Ruuman, also rising but heading in the opposite direction.

‘Then we choose death!’ I snarled. ‘For what else is there on this cursed world for any of us?’

‘I cannot follow you that way, son of Vulkan,’ the Ironwrought replied. He urged me to go with him. ‘Don’t sacrifice yourself on such a foolish errand. Live and make them work for the scalp. I will. While we live there is hope. Please, come with me, Ra’stan.’

I shook my head, slowly, lowering my gaze. My path was set before me, there would be no deviation from it. When I looked up again Ruuman was gone, having disappeared over the rocks on the other side.

‘Don’t worry, brother,’ Usabius told me, affecting an air of mild fatalism, ‘it is Salamanders business we go to now. Better that it’s just us.’

‘Aye… Just us.’

To the east, the sun was rising above the lip of the horizon, painting the volcanic plains in red.

I looked to the gauntlet laid out before us and our ignorant huntsmen that were still too close for us to avoid completely. Even making it across the camp was far from certain, let alone surviving what we might encounter in the cave itself.

‘We skirt the edges of the camp,’ I said, gesturing to a ragged chain of fang-like rocks. I met Usabius’s gaze. It was burning, full of conviction. ‘Stay low and move fast,’ I told him.

‘Vulkan lives,’ he said to me.

‘Vulkan lives,’ I replied, then we leapt over the barrier of rock together and ran like the hell-drakes of Nocturne were behind us.

We had barely reached halfway when a shout rang out, more deafening than a gunshot.

Ruuman had been right. The Iron Warriors had seen us.

I risked a glance and saw the armoured column was still moving but the two sky-hunters had peeled off and were roaring towards us. Slab-nosed and bulky, the jetbikes bullied their way through the lifting gloom before the dawn. Angular fairings at the prow gave them a hard and unyielding appearance. Close up, their riders were wild, whirling spiked chains around their heads and hooting in anticipation of the kill. The rest of the Iron Warriors seemed satisfied to let them have our blood and drove away from the advancing storm.

Judging by their hellish speed, I reckoned we could get another thirty metres before they were upon us. The underslung cannons glaring from beneath each sky-hunter’s nose could shred us before we got another three, but the riders appeared to be intent on close-quarters.

Also, both had directed their mounts at me.

‘Get to the cave. Go!’ I bellowed.

Usabius ran on ahead, as I slowed and drew my chainsword.

Two warriors mounted on jetbikes against one on foot. The odds were not in my favour.

I had left my battle-helm up on the rocky shelf next to Vulkan’s. In my haste and lingering trauma, I had forgotten both. The acrid tang of their exhaust fumes reached me before they did. Black sand whipped up in their wake and stung my eyes. I tasted the petrochemical stink of their engines, felt them vibrate through the earth despite the fact they rode just above it on anti-gravitic repulsion plates.

‘Vulkan lives!’ I roared, touching the chainsword to my forehead in a final warrior’s salute. When I brought it back and settled into a fighting stance, its teeth were already blurring.

As the sky-hunters came to within twenty metres, they began to part.

Encircled, I would be forced to choose one combatant or the other. It was no choice, really, not one that mattered at least. Pick one and my back would be exposed to the other. I could almost feel their heavy blades piercing my armour and flesh…

‘*Vulkan lives…*’ I whispered one last time, sparing Usabius and the cave mouth a sideways glance. I could not see him, and hoped that meant he had made it.

A keening blast of noise erupted from my right side, a staccato four-round burst that spat out a lethal welter of dark-red beams. An actinic charge filled the air at the same time, shimmered on it. A second later and the riders were screaming as the death ray chewed up their bikes and turned their flesh to dust, abruptly cutting them off.

Two sky-hunters crashed into the earth, wrecked and ablaze. Chunks of Iron Warriors battleplate joined them – an empty cuirass, greaves, boots and gauntlets, nothing inside them but ash.

I knew the devastating effects of volkite weaponry. The Martians had made it particularly potent against biological matter. Ruuman rode the third jetbike, a flaring culverin sitting under his prow. As the beam weapon powered down, he engaged the mount’s reserve arsenal. Paired bolters sunk into its fairings chugged to life, twin muzzle flares cutting star flashes in the half-light.

I do not know if he had been planning this. Perhaps it was a contingency that he switched to when he realised that he had become one. The conversion beamer was absent, too hefty and impractical to carry on a jetbike, likely spent on executing the vehicle's previous rider.

'Emperor praise you, you courageous fool,' I muttered as he sped past me, engines screaming and pouring his fire into the ablative armour of a Rhino. Strafing the vehicle's flank, he caught the fuel tanks and the Rhino went up in a ball of promethium fire.

Head down, the Ironwrought rode on, chased by the pintle-mounts of the battle tanks. Shellfire stitched his wake, throwing up clods of volcanic sand, but I was running now and could not wait to see if my saviour escaped or not.

Iron Warriors were coming after him, I heard their distant cries and promises of revenge. They were coming after me too. With the sky-hunters destroyed, I was in the wind and it was a matter of honour that this not be allowed to stand. But tanks are not nearly as swift or agile as jetbikes. I was close enough to the cave that I could get inside before they caught me.

After that… I had not thought any further ahead.

The same sickening sensation I had felt when I had seen the threshold of the cave through Lorimarr's mind's eye returned, only this time it was much more acute due to its actuality and proximity. The eight-pointed star drew my eye, compelling me, sickening me, but I fought its lure and breached the cave mouth gasping for breath.

Once inside, the effects lessened and I wondered if the mark was some kind of ward, a piece of Mechanicum technology made to appear as if it were arcane and esoteric. I had broken through, charged down its web of influence, and had begun to recover.

I looked around.

Darkness seemed thicker in the cave, unnaturally so. Though the air was cool against my face, it prickled my skin and resisted my passage through it as if it were sticking mud and not air at all.

It was deep, far deeper than it appeared from the outside, and spilled away into a narrow corridor of rock. As I could not see Usabius, I assumed he had penetrated farther. I followed the only route, hoping I would meet my brother at the end of it. I wanted to call out to him, to let him know I was coming and not likely to be alone, but I stopped short realising that I did not

know what else lurked within. Furthermore, the acoustics would broadcast my exact position to anyone following behind.

Time was the only advantage I possessed; I had no desire to relinquish it.

After what felt like several kilometres, the tight confines of the cave expanded into a much wider and higher cavern. Though it was hard to tell with any certainty, I thought I must have travelled down into the subterranean tunnels of Isstvan, because the ceiling of this new chamber was vaulted and fanged with stalactites.

It was colder here. Ice rimed the cavern's edges, and a light hoarfrost sparkled underfoot. Icicles dripped down from above, frozen in long, gnarled fingers.

I blinked. The drops of ice were held in place, hovering stilly in the air. At first I thought it must be an optical illusion but as I got closer I saw it was not. Time had ceased to beat in this place. It was held fast, as if caught in amber.

I blinked again.

Usabius was standing in the middle of the chamber, looking up at one of the chrono-frozen drops.

'I see it but I don't believe it,' he said. I assumed he was speaking to me.

'Nothing feels right about this place, brother,' I replied.

He turned, staring at me through his cracked retinal lens.

'Where is your power fist?' I asked, as I noticed the weapon was missing.

'I see it but I don't believe it,' he repeated.

As I came closer to him, I noticed other subtle details of his appearance had changed too. His armour was more battered; black and burned extensively in some places as if he had been caught in a terrible fire.

I frowned, not understanding. 'Usabius, what happened to you?'

'See it but don't believe it,' he said, lifting up his hands to grip either side of his battle-helm.

'Where is Vulkan?' I asked, a profound nausea creeping up from my gut. I swallowed back the bile in my throat. 'Brother, I…'

Usabius… *flickered*. Like a mirage, he was there and then he was not. I had seen pict-casts do something similar. It was called 'ghosting'.

'I…' My legs gave way and I put out my hands to stop from falling.

Braced, but far from steady, my hearts thudded in my chest. It was so hard I expected to see them burst through my ribcage, rip open my plastron and flop onto the ground in front of me. The reality of my world as I thought I

knew it was unravelling. Usabius was not as I remembered him, and through the flickering resolution of his seemingly temporal existence I perceived a half-truth beneath the image I had attempted to obscure him with.

During the last years of the Great Crusade, when the remembrancers still attended our fleets, when there was still something worth remembering, I heard an imagist speak of *pentimento*. The word derived from the ancient Romanii of old Terra, and meant ‘repent’. It referred to the act, by an artisan, of painting over an error. With patience, skill and the correct materials, such earlier drafts could be revealed beneath the layer that hid them. With savage clarity, I realised that I had painted over Usabius. This was my repentance for some misdeed. By now, my mind was reeling and despite my superior cognitive faculties, processing everything I was seeing was not easy. I knew, however, that in some as of yet undefined way, I had failed my brother.

Stark and harrowing as all of this was, a greater revelation yet awaited.

As I sagged with the weight of my guilt, my eyes strayed to the ground where I saw a mark burned into the earth. Fixated on the ceiling and its strange, time-defying properties, I had not noticed it until I was on top of it. A ring of black was burned indelibly into the ground, spikes interrupting its perfect circumference as if from some pulsing kinetic reaction.

I had seen such effects before, they usually came after teleportation, and were the residue from the extreme energy exchange that took place during spatial translation.

At first, I did not know what it meant, but then I saw the second mark sat within the first, encircled by the ring. It was difficult to discern. Wide shoulders, a broad back, kneeling down with its head bowed.

A figure, clearly. An individual primed for teleportation.

‘What does it mean?’ I asked, looking up from a half-prone position. Anger was rising in my gorge, getting the better of my other humours. Something else too, an emotion entirely foreign but familiar at the same time. Panic. Anxiety.

They shall know no fear…

It was our mantra, it was the way the Emperor had made us, distilled from the vital essence of his sons, our fathers. Genetic engineering, legacy, primacy: it was all undone in that moment.

Usabius stared, his hands still locked to his battle-helm as if, like the ice droplets, he too was frozen in time.

‘Answer me!’

The burning light of my brother’s eye flared again and with a hiss of escaping pressure, he slowly removed his battle-helm. Beneath was a face I barely recognised. It was burned, ravaged by hell’s fire. Salamanders are resilient to heat, but we are not impervious.

Though I tried to prevent it, though I had shored up my mental bulwarks with falsehood to protect me, the dam was now broken and veracity rushed over me in a flood.

Usabius had lost his identity to a firestorm, one that had billowed from the guts of a dying drop-ship and spilled out into his own. I had tried to warn him, to save his life, but I was too late. I let him go, and by the time I looked back only his clawed finger marks remained, dug into the metal.

‘You died,’ I uttered, almost in a rasp.

Reality seized me fully then, took hold like a docking clamp against the hull of a starship.

I remembered the pit of the dead, the Raven Guard as he stirred from unconsciousness about to give away my position. I was alone, having dragged him halfway across Isstvan, when the search lamps began to strafe. I could not risk his waking dooming us both, so I leaned over and crushed him with my power fist.

In the cave, I looked down at my right arm and saw the glove encasing it.

Aboard the *Purgatory*, an argument between myself and Sulnar had ended in a strained accord. I had believed my words to him of the carnage out on the plains, of the suffering and the pain expressed through the lips of another, through Usabius, but it was me. I said those words. The lieutenant commander had not moved when Usabius barged past him, because no one had barged past him. No one else had been there.

In the wreckage of the drop-ship, searching desperately for Vulkan. Even the traitor, Lorimarr, could perceive the truth and it amused him greatly to witness the mania to which I had succumbed. How could I have survived his psychic attack? Only another psyker could have done that.

Even my rank was a lie. The dying legionary Ik’rad had called me *lord*. He had once known me as an Epistolary. Only Usabius had ever called me captain. It was his rank, not mine. After his death, after the crash and the torment in my shackled psyker’s mind, I had become him or part of him and the projection I had fashioned was part of me, the part I could not fully reconcile.

I am Usabius, the half-remembered memory of a corpse conflated with my own self-identity.

We live in hell, a hell of black sand where nothing is as it should be and all has come to madness. A warrior, even one as steeled as a Space Marine, could lose his mind in such turpitude.

My thoughts returned, strangely apt in the circumstances.

'You died, brother,' I said, addressing the manifestation of my mind that wore the corpse-form of Usabius.

It nodded.

'I am sorry for that.'

It made no response, and only kept staring.

'Is any of this real? The cave, the Iron Warriors, the survivors?'

Like some spectre of ancient Terran myth, Usabius extended a jagged-looking finger to point at the scorched earth surrounding me.

Here was truth. Much like a drowning man whose senses are dulled by the water, I surfaced from a dark dream into an even darker reality.

As I contemplated the meaning of the mark, I heard the rush of booted feet coming up the corridor from behind me. The Iron Warriors were almost here, as real as the sweat on my brow or the earth beneath me.

'It won't be long–' I said, but stopped short.

Usabius was gone, and I was alone just like I always had been.

Haukspeer had given his life following a madman out into the night; Ruuman too, probably. They must have known. On some small level, I think I did too but kept it hidden away in a locked part of my mind where I could keep it shut down.

I pushed myself up, gripping my chainsword in my off-hand as I rose. I would meet these bastards on my feet.

Broken or not, I was still a warrior of the Legiones Astartes, I was still a Salamander.

One revelation remained, still denied to me by the mystery of the cave.

The ring of scorched earth held the secret, I had but to unlock it to know the truth. The question was obvious.

What is Vulkan's fate?

I had a gift, one I had forgotten and projected onto another. With it I could scour the ends of this earth in search of the bright and shining beacon that was my father. So much grief, so much death. I tapped the latent air around me, still redolent with the psychic screams of my brothers. Cerulean fire

flared in my eyes, I felt it burning, saw it spilling beyond the cavern to reveal the shadows of my murderers as they crept closer.

Any attempt to find my father, if I opened my mind fully to the horrors of Isstvan, would likely kill me and everything around me in a psychic storm…

An Iron Warrior emerged from the darkness into the azure light. I saw him balk in the few seconds I had left. Throwing back my head, I unshackled my mind, let it roam and see all and everything. It unlocked the ring of scorched earth; it showed me the last truth that still eluded me.

White light, heat and the disorientation of translocation.

He was gone. Vulkan was gone.

A conflagration was blazing through my body and I lowered my eyes to watch my enemies flee in vain. I would give them a truth, just before we all died, before the cavern and the tunnel and several kilometres of the Isstvan plain were reduced to a blackened crater in the outpouring of my psychic anguish.

I did not regret my death, just as I did not regret my life. I wished I had met my father one last time, but that was not the future we had made for ourselves.

It is a grim, dark horizon we are travelling towards. In it the galaxy burns.

But there is still hope…

‘There is still hope,’ I said aloud, my voice rising to a scream.

The Iron Warrior slowed and turned. As he looked into my eyes, I think he realised that he was doomed.

Here was the truth; this was what I told him.

‘Vulkan lives!’

The helm of the fallen primarch Vulkan on the sands of Isstvan V

ARTEFACTS

‘At the edge of the Ghoul Stars, at the very fringe of Segmentum Ultima, my brother and I united on a mission of mercy. We emerged from warp transit wreathed in tendrils of psychic corposant that clung to the scarred hulls of our ships – but we arrived too late. We had come to rein in a madman, yet could only bear witness to an atrocity.’

Fire crackled beneath the primarch’s words, though T’kell found it hard to discern if the sound came from his lord’s voice or the flaming torches on the walls. Whatever the cause, the air was filled with the reek of hot ash and cinder, carried along by Vulkan’s deep and rumbling baritone.

‘It wasn’t much to see, though I’m not sure if I expected it to be. So different from our home world, one to the other as night is to day… Nocturne is a terrible place to behold and, though I felt no fear as I emerged from my own capsule into the burning dawn, I could appreciate its feral majesty. Tall peaks of fire mountains, long plains of ash and sun-baked deserts, the stink of sulphur from the oceans – it was bracing, deadly. From the void, Nocturne is a deep red orb, a blazing iris of fire. His was a dark, unremarkable world. It looked like a black marble, flawed by the grey smog of its polluted atmosphere.’ Vulkan scowled at the memory, as if he could taste those noxious fumes on his tongue. ‘To be able to see it from orbit, those clouds must have been dense, but I am told they hid a plethora of sin. Even so, it doesn’t justify what he did. What we saw him do.’

A shadow passed across the primarch, the encumbent silence that followed this declaration filled by the sound of his heavy breathing. T’kell realised the heinous act that Vulkan was describing had left a mark deeper than any brand – though whether the perpetrator or the act itself was the cause, he did not know.

‘Darkness veiled it, a curse met out by an ugly moon called Tenebor. Its name meant “shadow”, an apt appellation. Here it was literal, for the moon cast a shroud of night over a world desperately in need of illumination.

Before that moment, I hadn’t ever seen his home. Now I never will, and I cannot say I’m sorry. By every account I’ve heard, it was a wretched place, without possibility of transformation.

‘It began as a starburst, noiseless flashes in the vastness of space. They came from a dark, dagger-like vessel – his own flagship. At first, I could not quite reconcile what I was seeing with the deed. Great beams of stabbing light and swarms of torpedoes hurtled down onto his dark world. All attempts to hail his ship failed, of course. Our brother was in the mood for vengeance, not reason. He wanted to smite it, he would declare later, and expunge it of all sin in a single, purifying and insane action. The surface erupted in a chain of stark, flaring blooms and for the first time in its long, benighted history the world saw light. But it was the light of ending.’

Vulkan paused, as if wanting to choose his words carefully and recount what he remembered as clearly as he could.

‘You have to understand, my son, because this is the where the real horror of it all lay – there was precision in that orbital bombardment. He wasn’t just venting his wrath. He knew. Some flaw in the tectonic structure, it doesn’t matter how or where, was targeted directly. I had thought we were witnessing petulance, the immature act of an immature soul with tragic consequences. But it wasn’t. What we saw was premeditated.’

And so it was the perpetrator *and* the deed that had left the primarch so disquieted. T’kell could not imagine having to accept the reality of that. Vulkan went on.

‘Cracks split the outer crust along fault lines, then spread, webbing in all directions. Fire colonised the landscape, virulent as a plague, until the entire surface of the world was burning. Then it was no more. In one cataclysmic explosion, its moon and every minor celestial body in sight of this destruction were gone.’

Lowering his head, Vulkan took a moment to regain his composure. When he looked up again his eyes blazed like the fires he had just described, the physical expression of anger he felt towards his brother for unleashing planetary genocide.

‘Debris rained against us, stripping shields and battering the armour of our vessels. We rode the shock waves that emanated from the detonation but emerged scathed in ways that went beyond the dents and scrapes clawed into the ship’s hull. An immense expulsion of heat faded and in its wake was dust and floating rock.

‘Silence reigned for a while, until Horus conquered our collective sense of disbelief and gave us purpose. He was incensed at what our brother had done. He was also determined to run him down. I gave chase alongside, not knowing that Horus had tasked another primarch to slip around undetected. Between the three of us, we bracketed the world-murderer with our ships. There could be no escape. I thought Horus might open fire and kill him for what he had done, but in fact he was determined to redeem him. I wonder had there been one of us to do that later for Horus, would events have taken a different course now?’

Again, Vulkan paused in his iteration, as if imagining a reality where that was true – Horus the loyal son, instead of the rebel.

‘It doesn’t matter now. Nostramo died in those moments and though none of us could have realised it at the time, so did any chance for Curze’s redemption. It all began with him. I think it will probably end that way too.’

T’kell watched his primarch closely, being sure not to speak until Vulkan had finished. Around them, the atmosphere of the forge was soothing, the heat and the penumbral darkness adding solemnity to the primarch’s words. Ash and the smell of warm metal were redolent on a shallow breeze, but the sound of hammer strikes against the anvil was quiet for now; the forge’s blacksmith had paused in his crafting.

‘I can’t fathom what must have been going through his mind, my lord. I have seen destruction on such a scale before, but to turn your guns on your own world with the express purpose of destroying it… We are generationally set apart from our sires, but at least I can understand your motivations.’

‘But not in this?’ asked Vulkan. ‘Not in the task I have asked of you?’

‘I’ll do my duty, primarch,’ T’kell answered, somewhat defensively, as though not wanting Vulkan to think he was a poor son.

‘But you don’t understand the reason.’

T’kell confessed, ‘I do not. Not for this.’

Vulkan leaned back in his seat. It was a simple block of stone, carved from the face of the mountain, worn to the primarch’s shape by the many hours he had spent sitting and toiling over the artefacts he wrought with his Emperor-given craft. One particularly magnificent specimen was lying on his workbench, now finished. The hammer was a true work of art, and T’kell found his own crafts humbled by the weapon’s beauty.

Vulkan saw him admiring it.

‘Do you know why my father made all his sons different?’ he asked.

T’kell shook his head. His war-plate whirred and groaned in sympathy. He had forged the armour himself, and it was as finely artificed as any suit of ceramite and adamantium in the XVIII Legion. Usually, it was crowned with a drake’s head helmet, but T’kell would not dream of wearing that when in conference with his lord. The primarch always insisted on meeting the gaze of his warriors and expected the same in return. He would have reprimanded the forge master if he had hidden his eyes behind retinal lenses.

‘I cannot even pretend to understand the depths of the Emperor’s design or colossal intellect,’ T’kell said humbly.

‘Of course not,’ Vulkan replied without condescension. ‘I believe he did it as part of his vision for the galaxy. Though I know my brother Ferrus would disagree, each of us has an important role to play. Guilliman is the politician, the statesman. Dorn, the keeper of my father’s house, and Russ is the dutiful watchman that keeps us all honest.’

‘Honest?’

Vulkan smiled coldly. ‘A joke that is no longer funny.’

‘And Curze?’ asked T’kell, his desire for knowledge a symptom of his Martian training. ‘What is he?’

Vulkan’s faced darkened.

‘Necessary. Or so we all believed once.’

Mars was the reason for Vulkan’s return to Nocturne and his brief reunion with his forge master. Resupply from the Mechanicum had been sparse and the primarch had been forced to deviate part of his fleet’s course to the one munitions store he could rely on – his own home world. The fact that T’kell was stationed there on the fortress-moon of Prometheus only made it more timely.

‘And Horus, and you?’ T’kell pressed, his eagerness to understand interfering with his sense of propriety.

Vulkan indulged him. ‘Horus was the best of us. Although, in our father’s eyes, we were equals. I always felt like a child in his presence. Unless you’ve met him, it is hard to describe but my brother had this… *way* about him, an undeniable charisma that made you listen to his every word and then believe it without question. Back then, none of us thought anything but absolute loyalty lay in his heart, otherwise we might have realised just how dangerous his persuasive aura could be.

‘His role was leader and once I would have followed him to whatever end and for any purpose. But that pedestal has fallen, and there will be no

righting it. As for me…’ Vulkan laughed humourlessly, spreading his arms to encompass the forge and the vault beyond. ‘I am my father’s weapon-maker, but unlike Ferrus or Perturabo, I *specialise* in the unique.’

T’kell’s gaze strayed to the immense vault door that dominated the back wall of the chamber as he recalled the many names and forms of the artefacts within.

‘Like the hammer?’ T’kell said, gesturing to the workbench.

Vulkan turned to regard it, lost for a moment as he ran his hand across *Dawnbringer*’s head, the haft bound in firedrake hide, the gemstones and the esoteric device he had fashioned into its pommel.

‘It is the single finest thing I have ever wrought,’ he told the forge master, ‘but it was never meant for me. I forged it for my brother, for Horus, and that is another reason for the task I must set for you.’

Vulkan left it alone, but did not avert his gaze from the hammer.

‘It was after Nostramo, after Ullanor. My gift to him to commemorate his achievement. With Jaghatai’s help we had captured Curze and brought him to heel. You have to understand, my son, nothing like this had ever happened before. For a primarch to act in the way Curze had, to do what he had done…’

The primarch shook his head.

‘It was unconscionable. Yet, my brother had a solution.’

‘Remake him,’ Horus said proudly, and with enough enthusiasm and vigour to make the Lord of Drakes look up from his brooding.

Horus looked resplendent in his armour, a muscular sheath of pale ivory and jet black. It was a suit so fine that even the great blacksmiter had to admit his envy of it.

He and Vulkan were alone in Horus’s quarters on board the Vengeful Spirit, *sitting in companionable silence when the primarch of the Luna Wolves spoke. They shared a drink together, a heady broth native to Cthonia – Vulkan did not know its name, but appreciated it for its heat and potency.*

He swilled the mixture around the cup, looking into the tiny maelstrom he had made, as if the answer he sought might be waiting for him somewhere within its depths.

Vulkan looked up, his eyes glowing as they always did in the dark confines of Horus’s private chambers. ‘Tell me how, brother, for no one more than I wishes that to be.’

‘We can rehabilitate our brother.’

At first even Horus's rhetoric could not sway him, and Vulkan looked more aloof than ever, concealed by the shadows. The first primarch's quarters were functional but well-appointed, even opulent. A fire raged in an ouslite hearth, a concession Vulkan felt sure Horus had made to make his guest more comfortable. Instead, the Lord of Drakes eschewed the light and heat of the fire, wondering why he hadn't disabused himself of this conference as Jaghatai had, though his gaze occasionally strayed to the flames.

'After this,' said Vulkan, angrily jabbing a finger towards the empty darkness and imagining the swathe of atmospheric dust that used to be Nostramo. 'How?'

Horus smiled in a way that suggested he already knew this would work, and had but to convince Vulkan of it.

'Each of us shall take him under our wing, nurture him.' He gestured with his hands, miming the next part. 'Mould him into the weapon he needs to be, not the jagged implement he is right now.'

Vulkan frowned, thinking of the midnight-clad prisoner they held, doubting the sagacity of his brother's suggestion.

'*Think of it like this,' said Horus, his optimism unwavering. 'You are a weapon maker,* the *weapon maker. Curze is but an untempered blade that requires its edge honing. Remake him, as you would remake a broken sword, Vulkan.'*

There was a vibrancy to his eyes as Horus made his pitch, his certainty for his wayward brother's resurgence becoming infectious.

'I believed him,' said Vulkan, leaving the past behind. 'Curze was to be separated from the bulk of his Legion, in the hope that – free of Nostramo's malign influence – he could change. I would take him first, then Dorn… once he was healed.'

'Healed?'

Vulkan's expression turned rueful. His eyes met the forge master's. 'Curze had tried to kill Rogal.'

T'kell cursed under his breath at this admission.

'The Praetorian of Terra?'

'I know of no other,' said Vulkan. 'For Horus's plan to work, it was vital that the relationship between Dorn and Curze be repaired. But after Kharaatan I knew we had erred. I don't know whom Horus had planned to put Curze with next, but we didn't get that far. The demands of the Great Crusade and his new position as Warmaster kept Horus in a distant orbit. I

couldn’t attend the Triumph at Ullanor, so I had not seen him in person since Nostramo. Years had passed without word between us, but I knew I must disturb him for this. I had seen what was within Curze’s heart. It was nightmarish and broken. I pitied my brother, hated his deeds but not him, and feared what he would do or become if allowed to continue.

‘Horus and I met across a lithocast projection. I had already spoken to Dorn, who had returned to Terra by that point, and we were of the same mind. Foolishly, I thought Horus would be too. His initial greeting was warm enough, if a little more prickly than I had once known.’

‘Brother Vulkan, what matter of great import do you come to me with that warrants my time and the disruption of our father’s Crusade?’

The Warmaster stood amongst warriors on the bridge of his flagship, an array of sensorium and auguries suggested along the edges of the hololith. He wore different battleplate to their last meeting aboard the Vengeful Spirit, *repainted in the deep sea green of his newly renamed Legion.*

The Sons of Horus.

‘The undertone of condescension was hard to miss,’ Vulkan said to T’kell. ‘I have no doubt it was deliberate.’

‘I apologise, brother, for taking you away from your duties, but I believe this matter is dire enough that it must come to your attention.’

Horus’s eyes widened and Vulkan could not deny the sense that his brother was mocking him.

‘It must*? Well, then you had best speak of it, Vulkan, so I can gauge for myself just how* dire *the matter is.’*

It was more than just the Warmaster’s tone that worried Vulkan – something deeper, implied rather than overtly expressed. Though little of the ship was discernible behind Horus in the hololith, there was enough to suggest that it had been changed. Markings that had not been there before, strange symbols Vulkan did not know the meaning or significance of, were partly visible. At first, he considered they might be lodge sigils, as it was Horus who had instigated these traditions within the Legions. Vulkan had eschewed them, despite his brother’s overtures, such bonding rituals redundant in the face of the Drake’s own Promethean Creed.

But what he saw did not seem entirely related to lodge culture. There was something else, something inscrutable…

‘It was as if another being were wearing my brother’s skin,’ Vulkan explained. ‘Yet even that skin, with all its usual trappings, was a darker

version of what I knew.’

‘You believed him changed?’ asked T’kell.

‘It was more than that. I recounted what had happened on Kharaatan – Curze’s mania, his suicidal, nihilistic tendencies. Despite the strange mood I had found him in, I expected Horus to be appalled.’

Vulkan paused, his jaw hardening at the memory.

‘But he laughed,’ he said, frowning incredulously. ‘I was angry and confused.’

‘I see nothing amusing in this, brother,’ Vulkan said, wondering what had happened to the noble warrior he had once so admired. ‘We have failed.’

Horus’s mirth turned to serious intensity. ‘On the contrary. You have succeeded.’

‘I do not see how.’

‘Curze cannot be tamed. His is a necessary evil, a monster to help us win this long war and keep our hands clean.’

‘How are they clean? They are tainted just as his, perhaps not with murder, but with complacency in the full knowledge of Curze’s homicidal pathology.’

Horus leaned in, his face filling the grainy hololith.

‘Every general needs a weapon of terror, an instrument to threaten the hardiest of his enemies with. You have sharpened ours well, Vulkan. From what you’ve told me, Curze has turned fear into a blade that I can wield.’

‘This is no weapon we should harness. His mind is broken, Horus. He needs help.’

‘He’s had help. Yours. And I am grateful for it.’ Horus leaned back again. ‘If there is nothing further?’

‘I saw something in Horus,’ Vulkan said to T’kell. ‘Something that stopped me from replying. It made me withhold the gift I had made for him. It made me realise that my pleas would forever fall on deaf ears. It has also driven me to my decision about the vault. Some weapons are simply too dangerous, in the wrong hands.’

Despite everything he had heard, T’kell still pleaded.

‘You are not the leader of a rebellion against the Emperor. It is not your army that we go to censure on Isstvan. You are not Horus.’

Vulkan’s eyes strayed to the vault. ‘Why is it so important to you that we do not destroy them?’

‘Because they are your work and legacy. Destroy them and the galaxy will never see their like again.’

‘And would that be such a terrible thing, my son? As weapon maker, I have forged an arsenal that could cause unimaginable death and suffering. That is not a legacy I want.’

‘Then why fashion them in the first place?’

Vulkan leaned forward so he could place his hand on T’kell’s shoulder. The gesture dwarfed the forge master, but was paternal and reassuring.

‘Because it was my purpose, the one my father made me perform, and back then I did not believe any of us *were* the wrong hands. Through Curze and Horus, I now sadly know different. One maniac in our midst, a tragic error of nurture over nature that I can understand and accept. Horus is rational. Not only that, he is the very best of us. I would freely admit that it terrifies me to think of him wilfully inciting rebellion. He is an enemy I would not wish to fight on any level, not least of which because he is my brother. And should my craft, what lies beyond those vault doors, be taken by Horus… I cannot be responsible for that, T’kell.’

Vulkan rose to his feet to declare the matter closed, taking up the hammer *Dawnbringer* as he did so.

‘Come. I’ll show you what must be done.’

Together they crossed the smoke-thronged forge, their armour reflecting the lambent firelight, until they reached the door of the vault.

It was immense, as was the vault itself, and Vulkan used an icon he had fashioned as part of his armour to unlock it. The small fuller slipped into a recess wrought into the door’s ornate surface. It was difficult to see, and T’kell realised he would not have found it without the primarch to show him.

One twist and the cavernous space was filled with the dull clunk of gears, pulleys and chains – the sound of an old mechanism churning to life. After a few seconds the door began to open, slowly but inexorably. It split down the middle, each half opening outwards and into the forge.

When the gap was wide enough, Vulkan stepped through and led T’kell into the vault after him.

As he passed through this slender portal, T’kell marvelled at how thick the doors were, at the sheer incredible artifice of their construction. Despite their ostensible function, they were as beauteous as any of Vulkan’s creations. Had Ferrus Manus made these doors they would be cold, ugly things. Impervious, secure, but ultimately bland.

Where the Lord of Iron was a smith, Vulkan was an artisan, or so T'kell believed.

'You are the first and only one of my sons to see this vault,' said Vulkan. 'Held safe within its walls is every artefact I have ever forged.'

Muttering a word of command, Vulkan ignited the braziers around the room. Flickering torchlight cast the contents of the vault in tones of umber and crimson, filling every recess with shadow. Only hints of the wonders that the primarch had fashioned were revealed.

T'kell recognised some, and knew their names.

Obsidian Chariot.

Vermillion Sphere.

Light of Unmaking.

Some were constructed as simple blades; others were larger, more complex mechanisms. All were named.

Names had power, as Vulkan often said. To name a thing was to give it identity, resonance. An enemy does not fear a man who wields a sword, but would give pause to one who held the *Fangblade of Ignarak*. Such things mattered to the Lord of Drakes and were a part of his teachings.

'Such wonders…' breathed T'kell, scarcely able to comprehend his primarch's magnificent labours.

Vulkan had set the hammer *Dawnbringer* down amongst the other treasures and was about to reach for his spear when he stopped, fingers poised to wrap around the haft. Sword and spear were his preferred weapons, *Thunderhead* having been destroyed earlier during the Great Crusade.

'I hope your indecision represents a change of heart, primarch,' ventured T'kell when he had recovered his composure enough to speak.

'It does not. The artefacts must be destroyed. I am bound for Isstvan so cannot do it myself, which is why you must, T'kell.'

'Then what *is* wrong, primarch?'

Leaving the spear where it stood shackled to the rack, Vulkan took up *Dawnbringer*.

'I believed I had chosen poorly, although this feels right,' he said. 'Fitting. Perhaps its epithet will see my brother illuminated after all.'

T'kell looked on despairingly at the artefacts, desperate to preserve them and his lord's legacy.

'Primarch, I beseech you,' he uttered, bowing to one knee. 'Please do not ask me to do this. At least save *something*.'

Vulkan looked down at his forge master, then to the inside of the vault.

‘There are weapons here that can destroy worlds, my son…’

‘Or save them from destruction,’ T’kell replied, looking up at his lord, ‘in the *right* hands.’

‘Mine?’ asked Vulkan, meeting the forge master’s pleading gaze.

‘Yes! Or Lord Dorn, or Guilliman. Even Russ!’

Vulkan held T’kell’s gaze a moment longer before turning away.

‘Rise, forge master. I would not have one of my sons beg me on his knees.’ There was a snarl in Vulkan’s voice and for an instant T’kell thought he might have overstepped.

‘I am driven to it, primarch.’

‘Very well.’

‘My lord?’

Vulkan faced him.

‘I said, very well. Something should remain. If I destroy everything, then I have given up on hope and seeing loyalty and honour endure in my brothers. I won’t do that.’

T’kell visibly relaxed, the relief at his primarch’s words evident on his face.

‘You are to remain here, T’kell. You won’t come to the Isstvan System – your place is now on Nocturne and Prometheus.’

‘But, primarch–’

‘Do not defy me a second time,’ Vulkan warned. ‘I am not *that* tolerant.’

T’kell bowed his head in contrition.

‘You shall become Forgefather, and keeper of the artefacts in this vault.’

‘Forgefather?’ asked T’kell, frowning. ‘Am I not your forge master, my lord?’

‘Of course. A legionary can be more than one thing, T’kell. I am entrusting you with this duty, just as I entrusted you with the vault.’

‘What duty, primarch? Name it, and it shall be done.’

‘To act as custodian. To swear you will protect these artefacts and should anything happen to me, ensure they are well hidden, far from those who would seek to use them poorly.’

T’kell saluted vehemently. ‘I swear it, Lord Vulkan.’

‘Good. Choose seven to remain, and only seven. One for each of our realms on Nocturne.’

‘There are thousands in here, primarch. How can I possibly–’

‘Indeed there are,’ said Vulkan, tying the hammer off around his belt and reaching for his gauntlet. Kesare’s drake scale mantle was already hanging around his broad shoulders. ‘Seven, Forgefather, that is what your primarch decrees.’ Vulkan was leaving, his mind now firmly on a reckoning with Horus.

‘I go to join with Ferrus’s fleet,’ he called back to T’kell. ‘See it is done before I return.’

He walked away bound for the spaceport, leaving T’kell behind.

The Forgefather regarded the contents of the vault, trying to contemplate the impossible task before him.

‘Seven…’

The mighty Vulkan is a blacksmiter without peer

IMMORTAL DUTY

I have erred, and so I must atone.
I lived when I should have died, and so I must become Immortal.

– Oath of the Immortals

On my knees, I faced the ship's deck. The contorted faces of my brothers stared back, frozen in their last tormented moments.

My name is Ahrem Gallikus and I am Immortal, but this was the day that I was supposed to die.

It was my right. My destiny, one that I alone set in motion long before the fields of our greatest ignominy. Long before Isstvan.

A chill pricked the skin at the nape of my neck, between the black adamantium gorget and a closely shorn scalp of coal-dark hair. At first I thought it was the starship's atmospheric recirculation lacing the air with frigidity, until I realised it was the axe blade poised in judgement.

Mercifully, the edge remained enervated or I would surely have been dead already. But then why imbue it with an actinic sharpness when a simple heft and cleave will do the job just as well?

Logic. Efficiency. Temperance.

Forged together, these words were our creed. A bond of iron, I always believed. Where was this alloy in our father when he needed it most? Again, as they often did in those days of bereavement and grief, my thoughts turned to melancholy.

'Ahrem,' uttered a voice from the shadows surrounding me, as sharp as the naked blade against my flesh. 'Tell us.'

He used my given name, the one afforded to me by the chieftain of Clan Gaarsak, and it grated in my ears. He had no right to use that name.

'I am Legionary Gallikus, Order Primii,' I replied with minimum respect. Back then I saw it as needless theatre, all of this.

'Gallikus, then,' uttered the voice a second time, the irritation in its timbre unmasked. 'We have questions. You will answer them.'

The axe blade descended incrementally, nicking my skin to draw a bead of blood. I saw my breath fog in the cold, stagnant air; felt the thrum of the *Obstinate*'s impulse engines resonating from the lower decks; heard every minute adjustment of my interrogator's posture in the low, predatory growl of his armour.

I was at peace, ready for my duty to end. My immortal duty. I lowered my head a fraction in gentle supplication.

My interrogator took that as an indication to proceed, which it was. In a way.

‘Tell us of the *Retiarius*.’

The name of that vessel put fire in my veins, banishing the cold of the hangar deck as my mind was cast back to hot halls, crimson and black. Sweat, blood, death… it all collided in a moment of searing recollection. It did nothing to warm the frozen flesh of the battle-brothers who stared back at me, dead eyes fixed wide in their decapitated heads.

I wondered briefly if the method of execution was meant to be symbolic, ironic or inadvertently in bad taste.

‘Tell us what you remember.’

I remembered fire in the upper atmosphere of Isstvan, and hell reigning across the heavens. But this was amorphous, an impression only. An emotional response.

I considered the possibility of sanction if I had admitted that. Emoting is supposed to be anathema to the Iron Tenth. I am sometimes led to wonder if life itself is, too. Instead, the first memory hit me. It felt like a mailed fist, but sang with the thunder of a battle-barge’s opening broadside…

‘Blood of Medusa!’

Mordan was seldom given to such outward expression, but our path to the *Retiarius* was proving volatile.

Harnessed in the assault ram’s dual prows, my brothers were giving off the same, albeit unspoken, sentiment.

Katus gripped his breaching shield double-fisted and held it across his chest like a totem. The bionic eye he wore in his right socket flared with nerve-induced auto-calibration.

Sombrak ground his teeth. He was my shield-brother and did it before every battle. It was loud and discordant because his jaw was cybernetic. Most of us were patched up thusly, our broken bodies rebuilt so that we could wage war one final time.

This was my eighth ‘final time’. Fate could be cruel like that.

Azoth was the last brother I knew well, though in all there were ten souls armoured in Medusan black in the hold. The rate of attrition was grievous amongst our ranks, and I soon found little need to learn names.

Of all my brothers, those known and unknown, Azoth was the most prone towards rhetoric. When we were made Immortal, our father stripped us of rank and title. Reforged, our new calling was a badge of shame to all in our Legion, and we lost our old identities. I believe that Azoth had been a *Frater Ferrum* – an Iron Father – before he fell from grace. He still had the gaps in his armour where they had unbolted his servo-arm. Whatever he had been before, now he was our sergeant.

He called out to us, bellowing against the tumult within the hold. ‘Forlorn hope! Our ranks have never been breached. Be steadfast.’ I could hear the servo-grind of his gauntlet as he gripped the haft of his thunder hammer. ‘Be resolute. Our dishonour demands it of us. Death awaits. We do not fear it! For what is death…?’

‘*To those who are dead already!*’ I roared in unison with my brothers.

He had a way with words, old Azoth. I think I will miss him the most.

Warning klaxons sounded, coinciding with a rush of crimson light flooding the low ceiling above us. We were close, but that was no guarantee of us reaching the *Retiarius* intact.

Over thirty assault rams were cast out into the void, all ridden by Medusan Immortals. I doubted that even half would make it through.

A Caestus was a durable vessel, fashioned specifically for this purpose. It was fast too, but the sheer amount of weapons fire erupting between the two larger vessels across the gulf of space was intense.

Great tracts of the void separated the *Gorgonesque* and the *Retiarius*, littered with silent explosions like scarred nebulae, and immense clouds of rapidly dispersing shrapnel. To us, aboard our diminutive assault ram, it was a long and perilous journey. To those two great behemoths, it would be regarded as close range.

As our hull shuddered with every close impact, the inertial suppression clamps held us steady. I closed my eyes and imagined our destination.

I had seen the *Retiarius* before, during the Great Crusade. Back then it had been an ugly, hulking vessel, well-suited to its brutish occupants. Its flanks were stained azure and dirty white, the echo of legionary war-plate. Slab-nosed and upscaled with muscular fighter bays and ablative armour plating, it was reminiscent of a pugilist in the form of a starship.

I felt our punch resonate through the Caestus’ hull, a glass fist striking a jaw of steel. Were it not for the magna-meltas burning furiously to soften the

Retiarius’ formidable hide then we would have been dashed to wreckage in an eye-blink.

As it was, we bit deep. Our glass fist had shards, and these had cut the outer flesh of the much larger vessel.

We broke through amidst an evaporating cloud of ferric smoke, our small assault ram having bored through the starship’s hull and clamped securely in place. Disgorged onto a dark, semi-lit hangar we had little time to get our bearings before counter-boarding troops arrived to try and repel us.

‘Lock shields!’

Azoth bellowed out the command, but we had already begun to form up.

It was an archaic tactic, reminiscent of the Romanii or Grekans of Old Earth, but it was effective. Much about war endures, fraternal conflict being foremost in my mind as we breached a vessel that we had once considered to belong to our allies.

But it was mortal armsmen and not our erstwhile brothers in arms, the World Eaters, that we faced upon that deck.

A strong, determined fusillade hit us first, hot las raining in from hastily erected weapon teams and broken firing lines. We held, soaking up their fire, taking everything they threw at us without flinching. Then we pushed on, moving as one, the aegis of our breacher shields impenetrable to the brave men and women who had come to stop us.

Despite their obvious disadvantage, the *Retiarius*’ mortal troops went in close. Three further assault rams had struck this section of the ship and all four squads came together before the armsmen hit us. Their solid shot weapons and mauls proved fatally ineffective.

The feeble momentum of their attack was dispersed when they shattered against our shield wall, and we absorbed the impact before returning it tenfold. Medusan war-oaths cut the air as cleanly as any blade.

And almost as deadly.

The mortals quailed before our seeming inviolability and fury.

I battered my first opponent, letting the blood from his broken skull spray against my shield before I finished him. The stomp of my foot was all it took, and suddenly I was pushing forwards with my immortal brothers. I shot a second through the cheekbone, his face erupting into mist as the mass-reactive shell exploded. I barged a third, splitting ribs. A fourth fell back in front of me against our advance and I severed his neck with the edge of my breacher shield, barely noticing the blood wash against my armoured boot.

Our purpose made us ruthless. A blockade around Isstvan's upper atmosphere was preventing the X Legion from reaching its father, with the *Retiarius* just one of the vessels impeding our path. Our mission was simple. Our Iron Fathers had been clear. Destroy the ship by any means possible. If that meant our deaths, so be it.

Inexorable, inevitable, we crushed the counter-assault forces from the *Retiarius*. Then we cut down the weapons teams, then the deckhands, until every crewmen in sight was slain. It was an honourless but necessary act.

After this, we broke ranks to quickly neutralise the rest. The deck was slick with enemy blood, but it was hard to discern in the dull light.

'Where are we?' asked Mordan.

'Aft of the enginarium, I think,' I replied. I knew a little of the vessel's layout, in so far as it would adhere to extant expeditionary fleet schemata. 'In one of the smaller hangar bays, near the ship's outer skin.'

A relatively small chamber with a low ceiling and bare deck plate underfoot, the hangar would have been used to cloister the *Retiarius*' various smaller interdiction craft. For now, it was empty of starfighters and assault craft, the World Eaters having disgorged their entire complement to duel with the Iron Hands vessels attempting to break through the blockade. Instead, ammo hoppers and riggers crowded the narrow space. Rigging chains hung down from overhead pulleys, gently swaying in the aftermath of the battle. Steam plumed from vents in the walls, and it was sweltering. A pervasive, animal heat lathered every surface in a fine veneer of sweat. It stank.

The vox-feed in my ear crackled. Communal channel. As expected, the voice of Brother-Captain Udris of the *Gorgonesque* came through the void-static.

Azoth told him that we had successfully made ingress and were moving deeper into the vessel. Resistance had been minimal.

We all knew that would change.

'The blockade?' asked Sombrak, when Azoth had finished receiving his orders from the *Gorgonesque*.

'Still intact,' Azoth replied. 'We'll know if it isn't. These halls will be filled with fire, the walls will shatter and we'll be cast to the void. For now, they stand. So we must sunder them. The Avernii are dying below us, brothers.'

‘I would have liked to stand with the Gorgon one last time,’ said Katus, his head bowed.

Azoth clapped a gauntleted hand on his shoulder. There was an underlying anger in the former Frater’s tone. At the betrayal unfolding on Isstvan or the stripping of his rank, it could be either or both.

‘Aye, Katus. So would I, but we have our lot and it is here aboard the *Retiarius*.’

We moved out, leaving the dead to fester in the heat.

As soon as our breach had been detected by the bridge crew, the *Retiarius* locked down its bulkheads and sealed all blast doors, seeking to contain us in a non-vital part of the ship.

While two of my brothers with lascutters went to work cleaving open the blast door to the hangar, the rest of us adopted a defensive posture. Azoth took me aside. His mood was grim.

‘No word from the other squads,’ he told me. ‘Cunaeda, Vorrus, Hakkar…’ he shook his head. ‘Thirty-three assault rams went out. Currently, I only know of four that reached the *Retiarius* and they stand in this hangar. How far is the enginarium?’

‘It’s relatively close,’ I said, recalling the schematics eidetically, ‘but there are warrens of tunnels and chambers beyond those doors before we reach it.’

Azoth nodded, looking to my side rather than at me, as if I had just confirmed what he already knew in his gut. He spoke with some resignation. ‘This was always a suicide mission…’

Of all the Immortals I had known and fought beside, Azoth seemed the least sanguine about dying to restore his impugned honour. Or perhaps it was dying with what he felt was his honour *still* impugned. Azoth was brave, the equal of any Iron Hands legionary – including the noble Avernii – but I suspected his fervent wish was to return to the order of Iron Fathers before he fell in battle.

But we were ghosts now, all of us, our honour as incorporeal to us as smoke. We had erred, and so we had to atone, or so the oath went.

The blast door from the hangar went down, heralded by a resounding clang as it hit the deck on the other side.

More gloom, more visceral darkness. Sweltering heat struck us like a fist, even more palpably than before. Impulse droning from the nearby enginarium was deafening. The thunderous report of broadsides trembled the deck underfoot and the walls shook with vibrational recoil. Petrochemical

stink merged with the actinic aftertaste of recently discharged laser batteries wafting upwards from the lower decks.

A starship at war was as brutal a battlefield as any, but the *Retiarius* deserved infamous acclaim for its severity.

The power-armoured warriors who came at us from the sweat-drenched shadows were testament to that.

First blood went to the World Eaters.

Clad in beaten up war-plate, festooned in spikes and studs, the sons of Angron looked worthy of their name. Blood and grime tarnished them, lending further ferocity to an appearance where no more was needed. Froth bubbled up through their rebreather grilles and fever-sweat scented the air. Savage, snarling, brutal – I saw animals coming at us from the shadows, not men. Their martial prowess was daunting, even to us.

An Immortal I did not know cried out, shield arm hanging slack with his vulnerable shoulder joint cut and the tendons beneath it severed. A second blow went from left clavicle to right hip. After overcoming inertial resistance, the two body halves slid apart and spilled my brother across the deck.

A plasma pistol at close range evaporated the head of another Medusan who reacted too slowly. Three more in the front few ranks were savagely gutted. Chainblades – both swords and axes – growled bestially.

Like an animal that was suddenly aware that it had been wounded, we recoiled. First we closed the breach from the door, keeping our enemy on the far side, so they couldn’t spill out and surround us. Then we fought back.

A strong push that was as much about Medusan tenacity and grit as it was the durability of our breacher shields saw us gain a footing in the first corridor section beyond the blast door. Our enemy yielded to us, surrendering ground without choice, but then trammelled any further progress with ferocity and sheer weight of bodies.

It was impossible to count, but I reckoned twice our number thronged the warren of corridors before us. We breached, every legionary in our foresworn company, and then the sons of Angron hit us like a hurricane of swords.

Hot sparks flashed angrily off the edge of my shield as it met the burring chainblade of a World Eater. My enemy was unhelmed, revealing a face puckered with scar tissue and metal piercings. A chain looped from his ear to

his nose and a spiked bar skewered both cheeks. Tattoos that looked like kill-tallies marked his neck, though the darkness made it hard to tell for sure.

I mashed my shield into his body and he staggered, grunting. Pressing my bolt pistol into the purpose-forged groove of my breacher shield, I shot him almost point-blank in the throat. Skull fragments and red matter rattled against my faceplate as the World Eater's head exploded.

Grimly, I advanced a step.

We all did.

Azoth rallied us.

'Hold steady!' he roared. 'Shields as one!'

They hit us again, raging, foaming at the mouth like rabid dogs. I felt the frenzied, repeated axe strikes against my shield resonate down to my shoulder. It burned and a numbness born from excessive muscular tension spread into my arm.

Azoth was unrelenting. 'Hold!'

A few more seconds of battery passed before he said, 'Now… heave!'

Unified, ordered, strong, we advanced and threw our aggressors back. Their killing lust made them fearsome but profligate with their effort. One man, however skilled and ferocious, cannot hold back a tide. A hundred men, if acting individually, will find themselves similarly disadvantaged.

After their initial wild flurry, the World Eaters were struggling to break us down. After herding them from the breach in the blast door made by our lascutters, we found ourselves several metres into the warren of corridors. Compared to the hangar it was confined, but wide enough for six shields abreast.

'Form ranks!'

Azoth was trying to impose further order. Unable to match their ruthless fury, it was the only way to break the World Eaters.

Thrust to the front, I was shoulder-to-shoulder with Mordan and Katus. The former was an arch fatalist who had surprised us all by living this long. The latter was a zealot who believed that strength came from adversity, and who revelled in his Immortal calling. Different though they may be, the mutual determination bleeding off my brothers was both infectious and galvanising. Behind us, I could sense Azoth's desire to be a part of the fighting rank, to prove that his shaming had been unjust. His shield was against my left shoulder guard, stalwart and unyielding. Sombrak had the

right, as staunch as an iron buttress. Not once had I seen him ever take a backwards step in combat.

As well as our former ranks, our clans were also scoured from us. To be Immortal is to be alone, but despite this abject form of penitence I felt as closely bonded to these warriors as if they were all from Gaarsak and not spread the length and breadth of Medusa.

The World Eaters hit us hard with a renewed strength born of rage. Bloodied, they carried on unbowed, proving as tough and determined as we knew them to be.

I had seen their warmaking first hand, not as an enemy but as an ally.

I earned my shame that day on Golthya, during the Great Crusade, not long after we were reunited with our father…

Inside the *Retiarius* we reached as far as a cross-junction before our progress was arrested. A hulking Dreadnought almost filled the corridor ahead of us with its sheer bulk. Our sudden stall also prompted World Eaters to attack us from either flank. Our steady advance was stopped at the nexus of the junction, forcing us into an arrow wedge.

Katus and three others stormed the monstrous war engine.

One of its weapon arms was missing, and I suspected it had been in the midst of ground deployment preparation when we breached the vessel. Instead, it had been reassigned to stop us getting any further. Sombrak carried a melta-charge. So did three other Immortals in the boarding party. Allowed to detonate in the enginarium deck, these incendiaries would wreak havoc on the *Retiarius*.

Leading with his shield, Katus took a bruising blow that dashed him against the wall. His power pack ruptured and the small explosion threw him forwards into the Contemptor’s lightning claw.

He spat blood. It sprayed the inside of his helm and leaked out through a crack in his faceplate. He was dead before he hit the ground. Bolt-shells caromed off the Contemptor’s armoured hide from the other three Immortals who had charged with Katus, but they were no more than irritants. The Dreadnought battered two of them down with its claw, gouging one through his shield and crushing the other under its armoured foot when the Iron Hand lost his footing.

The fourth Immortal was Mordan, the only one to be alone out of the group that had gone forwards to engage the monstrous Contemptor.

He wasn’t alone for long. A renewed shield wall rushed up to join him.

I tried to suppress a twinge of envy at my brother's glorious death as I advanced on the Dreadnought. It swung again, blood boiling on its energised talons and filling the corridor with the stench of burned copper. Mordan and I put up our shields as one, but I felt every pound of the Contemptor's piston-driven force rattling down through my body. It put us both on our knees.

'Your mistake…' I snarled, as Azoth waded into the gap left by Mordan and staved in the Dreadnought's head with his thunder hammer. Sombrak's volkite speared it through the chest in the same coordinated attack. It staggered as if unable to comprehend the immediacy of its own demise and fell back into an inert heap of metal.

The Dreadnought's death barely registered with the other World Eaters. They were of the killing mind now and would not relent until either they or we were dead. For the first time since we had boarded the *Retiarius*, the thoughts of the Iron Tenth and the World Eaters aligned.

We rode the storm of their fury. Without the Contemptor to break our ranks, the close confines of the corridors suited us.

'Take it!' shouted Azoth, now part of the front fighting rank where he belonged. 'Take everything they've got!'

Hammer blows pummelled our collective defence, but we held. The shield wall held and we were able to advance.

The base of my shield scraped the floor with every hard-won step. My shoulder burned from having to thrust it into the reverse side of my shield to keep the enemy from overrunning us. Our strength came from cohesion. If one link failed then our entire chain would unravel.

They hit us; we hurled them back. Each time we stood firm and absorbed the punishment, the World Eaters became more frenzied in their attempts to break us, and more reckless.

It took over eighteen minutes for us to kill every warrior-berserker in the warren. By the time it was over, blood slicked the walls, and drenched the deck beneath us, and we emerged into the next chamber weary but victorious.

I had expected to see the enginarium. What we found was something quite different.

A wide slope led from the corridor section's upraised bulkhead. We barrelled out onto it, maintaining good order and swiftly redressing our ranks in the process. It led to a pit, little more than a hollow basin of bare,

bloodstained metal. It had been recently cleansed but some marks remained, the indelible legacy of a Legion's bloodletting.

More of our Immortal brothers were waiting for us in the pit, impaled from groin to crown on ugly iron spikes. I counted thirty and balked at the realisation that so few of us had even reached the *Retiarius*, let alone died on it.

I heard the clenching of fists in impotent wrath, the muttering of vengeful oaths against the World Eaters. I kept my own emotions buried, but felt the deepest stirrings of hate begin to flare like a hot, angry welt against my pride.

Azoth had been right in his assessment – this was a suicide mission.

Glory and honour were not the rights of the damned, and we were damned men. Our shame had made us that.

My shame had condemned me to that fate. On Golthya.

It had been a bleak, ugly world. We were arrayed against the kethid, a hairless, perversely humanoid alien species who had, like so many others during the coming of Old Night, subjugated the native human populace. Deep into the yawning mouth of Jreth Valley, we deployed clouds of phosphex to kill the grey-skinned aliens, but the kethid had fashioned anabatic winds through their crude science. It turned our deadliest, most loathsome weapon against us.

How we burned, the green flame flaying our flesh and turning our iron to nought but charred matter…

Croen died first, our company's vexillary. Then Laeoc, Garric, Maedeg… until there was only me, Sombrak and a handful of others left. Our flank had been crippled and we too surely would have died were it not for the berserkers clad in blue and white that descended from on high.

We fought with them, but only in a supporting role. It was meant to be our victory. The World Eaters lauded us for our courage. I stood at the shoulder of Varken Rath, a legionary of singular skill, who thanked me personally for my efforts. Sombrak and the rest of our surviving iron-kin made similar sword-brothers.

Alas, our father did not see it thusly. I have wielded a breacher shield ever since.

I have often reflected on the cruelty of that and how the battle of Golthya mirrored that aboard the *Retiarius* in both its desperation and ferocity.

At the edge of the pit on board the *Retiarius*, the World Eaters were waiting for us. Unlike the ones we had defeated in the warren, these men were armoured more like gladiators.

I knew them. I had seen them emerging from the burned metal teardrops of their deep insertion pods, through the dissipating phosphex mist that had claimed over half my company before the alien kethid attacked.

Savage, even back then, the Rampagers were much changed.

Unhooded, they wore their facial tattoos openly. Chains and thick veils of iron ringlets accented their white and blue power armour, the spikes entwined between the links presaging a darker aspect to come. Head to foot, they were swathed in gore, baked hard over their war-plate by the *Retiarius*' immense enginarium heat. Without needing it confirmed, I knew in my marrow that the blood was Medusan, wrung from the tortured bodies of our brothers in the pit.

One of the Rampagers stood out amongst the rest. He nodded towards us, I thought. Then I realised he was actually gesturing to me.

'Gallikus…' his voice boomed across the echoing space, resonating off the pit and the shattered breacher shields lining its walls. 'Well met.' It almost sounded genial, a greeting.

It was, of sorts. Or rather, a challenge.

It was Rath. There could be no mistaking my former comrade in arms. It was blunt nomenclature for a genhanced instrument of war that was anything but. He was an exemplary swordsman and wielded a blade in each hand as if to prove it. I needed none. He had gutted kethid on those blades like they were swine. Falax, they were called, or so Rath had told me.

'If you want to reach the enginarium then this is the battleground you must cross to do it,' he said, calmly gesturing to the pit where they had staked our brothers out to die. He nodded to me again. 'I'll give you a good death. You've earned that right.'

I wanted to crush him. For his unintended condescension and the barbarous way his kin had treated mine. I almost heard our sword-bond break in his casual laughter.

'Some yet live!' cried Sombrak, who jabbed a finger at an Immortal twisting on his metal spit.

'Blood of Medusa!' Mordan's gauntlets cracked as they clenched tighter around the handle of his shield.

Rath was smiling. All the Rampagers were smiling.

Azoth had seen enough.

‘Kill them! Avenge the fallen!’ he roared, and every Iron Hand in our slowly dwindling company drew swords and mauls.

For what the Rampagers had done, we would have our vengeance at close quarters.

Our desperate assault was over. All we had left was retribution and, some believed, a last chance for honour. Our immortal duty.

To their martial credit, the World Eaters waited until we were halfway across the pit before they rushed to engage us.

Then we clashed. There was no order to it, no unity. Just blood.

We outnumbered the Rampagers two to one, but in the first eight seconds of the battle those odds were slashed drastically.

As I closed on Rath, briefly allying with Mordan to bring down one of the Rampagers and watching the World Eater gut one of my brothers in return, I considered the very likely fact that we had been allowed to get this far. That we had been drawn here for the prospect of a good fight. Perhaps Angron needed his psychotics to have their blood up before he unleashed them?

That arrogance would unstitch them, I decided.

Rath and I met in the centre of the arena. I still had my shield – it would be a vital barrier against my opponent’s twin falax – but had drawn a gladius in lieu of my holstered pistol.

Blade to blade. Honour demanded no less.

At first, Rath seemed to appreciate the gesture but then his face locked up in an expression of pure, agonised rage. His eyes widened, the spontaneously rupturing veins turning the sclera a deep, visceral red. No trace of the man remained; now there was only a beast.

For almost three minutes he hacked into my shield as I mustered a desperate defence. He only stopped when Sombrak tried to wade in and relieve me. Despite his murder-blindness, Rath reacted on instinct. He half-parried Sombrak’s thrust and let the blade pierce his side. With the other falax, he cut off Sombrak’s head.

I sagged back, too exhausted to take advantage of Rath’s distraction. My breacher shield was split down the middle, the arm holding it numbed to lead. I watched Sombrak’s body slump to its knees and his head roll away into shadow.

Then Rath turned, exultant with the kill, and came again for me.

No martial quarter was given this time. Rath was drunk on murder-lust.

His falax came in high and I twisted to let my shoulder guard take the blow. It found the vulnerable join between the metal plates of my armour and cut all the way down to the mesh beneath, cleaving through to my flesh. Blood welled instantly. I felt it seep into my armpit and gum around my chest.

The second blade I blocked, turning it aside before aiming a stabbing thrust that sank my gladius two thirds of the way into Rath's midriff.

It was a debilitating wound, meant to slow and eventually incapacitate. Rath showed no sign of either. We were up close. I could smell his charnel breath. A savage headbutt smashed my faceplate, cracking the retinal lenses and sending the glass splinters back into my face. An elbow strike put me on one knee before Rath brought the falax round into my flank where it lodged like a nail.

I screamed. He roared.

The end was near, my immortal duty almost dispensed at last. I saw my breacher shield, smashed apart and discarded on the deck. Other shields and the bodies of my brothers had joined it.

We should never have broken our ranks, given in to hate and fury. Ours was a colder creed, one of reason and the inviolability of tactical logic. We had erred, and now our atonement was due.

Head bowed, I felt a chill progress through me. It matched the cold disembodied sensation of my cybernetics.

But the blow did not fall. My neck and head remained attached.

Instead, I heard the klaxon drone of emergency sirens as the arena was flushed with red urgent light.

Azoth had fought his way from the pit. He was wounded, and his thunder hammer was bloody, but he still stood. He was venting the chamber, releasing everything into the void.

The World Eaters had not cleansed the pit before. They had purged it in the vacuum of space. My brother had found the mechanism and did so again, only with us and our enemies present.

In the few seconds I had left, I saw the grim resignation on Azoth's face. This wasn't how he had wanted it to end.

Then I was yanked out by the venting pressure. I felt light and not just because of the absence of air and gravity. Rath's last defiant roar was stolen in that rushed exhalation, pitched into silence in dark and starless space. He

swung for me, out of compulsion from whatever fuelled his rage rather than petty impotence, but the slow cut of his falax missed its mark.

Las flashes cut through the darkness, spearing us on their incandescent beams. Rath was shredded, so too were my brothers. I saw Azoth impaled through the chest before I was struck a glancing blow.

I spun, fading in the endless void, just another piece of debris.

The vista of the battling starships expanded before me, terrible and beautiful at once. Broadsides carved through kilometres of space. Explosions bloomed, abject in their quietude. The *Gorgonesque* was listing, her engines dead, her shields and armour stripped bare.

Her warp drives going critical was like the dawning of a miniature sun, a silent flash of awesome light that seared my retinas. I rode the resulting bow wave of pressure, my armour crystallising with hoarfrost even as I felt the explosive burn of the *Gorgonesque*'s dramatic last breath.

'I remember little more after that,' I told my accusers, the *Obstinate*'s black deck resolving before me as I left the memory of the *Retiarius* behind, 'save waking in your apothecarion and being marched to this hangar bay for summary judgement.' I could not keep the bitterness from my voice.

'You believe you are being treated harshly, Legionary Gallikus?'

I declined to reply, my head bowed with the cold weight of the axe blade upon my neck. The dead stares of my decapitated brothers frozen on the deck seemed mocking. And I was about to join them.

'Before you kill me,' I said at length, 'tell me, did we break the blockade?'

My accuser came forwards into the light. I heard some gesture he made, the whirring of old servos in a wrist or elbow, and felt the pressure against my neck ease. I looked up into the face of an Iron Father, but not one that I recognised.

He was badly scarred and his left cheek and part of his skull shone dully in the half-light. A tight grey beard like wire wool was shaved into a speartip on a jutting, imperious chin. The venerable Iron Father looked down upon me like I was the dirty oil he had to scrape from his weapons.

'We failed,' he replied. 'We were weak.'

There were two others with him, a Salamander and one of the Raven Guard.

'This is barbaric…' I heard the son of Vulkan mutter, despite the low hum of the *Obstinate*'s impulse engines partly masking his voice. His eyes flared

like burning coals.

The Raven Guard gently raised his hand, warning the Salamander to silence, and they stepped back as one. This was Iron Hands business, conducted in the Medusan way as our father had taught us.

I was finding it hard to process the situation, the incongruous presence of the other Legion warriors, the mood of fatalism emanating from the Iron Father. Then there was the last figure in the room with me, my would-be executioner, one I felt I recognized and that stirred a disquiet in me that I could not explain at the time.

‘Then what are our primarch’s commands? Is Horus defeated? Is Isstvan still contested?’ I had so many questions. ‘What of the *Retiarius*?’

The Iron Father shook his head, sadly. ‘It’s over, Legionary Gallikus. You were the sole survivor of the attack on the *Retiarius*. The war for Isstvan is done. We lost…’ He paused, as if to telegraph the blow that was coming so I could be ready for it. ‘Ferrus Manus is dead.’

‘Dead?’ I tried to rise from my knees but a strong hand held me down. ‘Release me!’ I snapped, turning to meet the haunted eyes of an old friend. For a moment, I let slip my other concerns. ‘Azoth?’

He gave no recognition of the fact I had just spoken his name. I thought he had died and yet here he was, aboard the *Obstinate*. But something was very wrong. His flesh looked cold, gelid, like the severed heads in front of me. Azoth’s fire had been extinguished. Ice filled his veins and countenance. A dead man stood before me with the axe, dead and yet animate, bereft of any sense of cognition that would mark him out as the warrior I once knew.

‘What have you done?’

‘What was necessary. Horus defeated us, scattered us. *Shattered* our Legions.’

Looking back at the Iron Father, I saw he held my breacher shield. It had been reforged, made whole, even as we ourselves had fractured.

‘You have erred,’ he said, ‘and so you must atone…’

I took the proffered shield, stunned into silence by the revelations I had just heard.

The Iron Father met my gaze and I saw the determination in his eyes, the bitterness and soul-shriving desire for revenge.

‘*Such is the fate of all Immortals…*’ uttered a voice behind me. The voice of Azoth, the echo of our damnation.

SONS OF THE FORGE

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The XVIII Legion, 'Salamanders'

Vulkan, The Lord of Drakes, Primarch of the Salamanders

T'kell, Forgemaster, now named Forgefather of Nocturne

Zau'ull, 'Firefather', Igniax Chaplain

Rahz Obek, 'Firebearer', Firedrakes captain

Zandu, 'Firefist', Firedrakes sergeant

Ak'nun Xen, 'Flamesmote', Firedrake

Gor'og Krask, 'Wyvern', Firedrake

Zeb'du Varr, 'Pyrus', Firedrake

Ashax, Firedrakes sergeant

Phokan, Firedrake

Gairon, Firedrake

Raios, Firedrake

Ba'durak, Firedrake

Rath, Firedrake

Votan, Firedrake

Fai'sho, Firedrake, Apothecary

Reyne, Shipmaster of the *Chalice of Fire*

The Shattered Legions

Kastigan Ulok, Iron Father of the X Legion, commander of the *Obstinate*

Ahrem Gallikus Azoth, Medusan Immortal

Saurian, Apothecary of the XVIII Legion

Morikan, The Silent', warrior of the XIX Legion

The XVI Legion, 'Sons of Horus'

Vosto Kurnan, Captain

Rayko Solomus, Legionary torturer

Menatus

Nevok

Uziel
Hajuk
Morvek
Ezriah
Krede
Ezremas
Ghodak
Harkus
Renk, Apothecary

The Dark Mechanicum

Regulus, Adept, appointed envoy to the Warmaster
Kronus VI, Castellax battle automata

THE VOW

‘What is the meaning of the sacrifice?’

Firefather’s words echoed around a hollow chamber, the deep bass of his voice rebounding off the walls of dark obsidian.

‘To live when others died,’ his supplicants replied as one. Solemnly, speaking with reverence... and anger. ‘To never know the pain of our greatest betrayal. To never feel the bite of our reflected shame in the traitor’s knife. To have never bled upon the black sands of Isstvan Five.’

Silence fell as their voices faded into a dull murmur of half-echoes.

‘What is our purpose?’ Firefather gripped the haft of a weapon and watched his brothers do the same.

‘To remain stoic and eschew all pride. To be the wardens and protectors.’

Firefather stood. His armoured form was reflected in obsidian and his kneeling brothers mirrored him also.

‘And what is our curse?’ he put to them, his voice rising as the mace head of his crozius burst into flame. Fifty warriors stood coldly in its burning aura, their drake scale seemingly alive in the snapping flames.

‘To never know glory. To be denied vengeance.’

Firefather held his burning crozius aloft before plunging it into an iron cradle of oil. Ignition was instant and violent. It sent shuddering firelight throughout the chamber, revealing the statues of fallen heroes, carved from onyx and silently judging.

‘And who are we?’ he asked, bellowing.

‘We are the Unscarred!’ they declared in a roar. ‘Sons of Nocturne. Salamanders and Firedrakes. Vulkan’s blood, and we shall never fail in our duty!’

An iron lid was closed over the cradle and the flame doused, so too the crozius in Firefather’s hand.

Darkness returned and the mood became sombre again.

‘That is the meaning of sacrifice...’ uttered Firefather quietly, turning as he left the chamber through its only archway. ‘Dismissed.’

PROLOGUE

An artefact

They called him an artisan, though Vulkan knew the truth of it. He was a warsmith, no different to his brothers Ferrus and Perturabo. Inside the vault, he had wrought terrible wonders all in the name of that calling, wonders which he now wanted T'kell to destroy.

'You are the first and only one of my sons to see this vault,' Vulkan said to his Forgemaster. 'Held safe within its walls is every artefact I have ever forged.'

Muttering the name of the first drake, Vulkan lit the torches around the chamber, and between the shadows the miracles he had created were revealed in wan light. Despite the darkness, his eyes saw everything, every weapon he had ever made.

He alone knew all of their names, for he had chosen each one.

Song of Entropy.

Igneous Hammer.

Anvil of Desolation.

Poetic, perhaps. Indulgent, certainly. Names had power, Vulkan knew. To name a thing was to give it identity, resonance. To name a thing was to make it real, tangible and to breathe life into the lifeless. No mere things of steel or adamantium these – they were Vulkan's legacy to his sons and more revealing of his character than any tome or memoir.

And even if he should return from Isstvan V, they all had to be destroyed. The galaxy had changed. It was no longer a safe place for miracles, for evil had a way of twisting the miraculous into something terrible.

'Such wonders…' breathed T'kell, and Vulkan saw a kind of fear in his son's eyes as well as awe.

Vulkan was going to war, for he too was an instrument of destruction, only one that had been forged by his father's hammer upon an anvil of science and apotheosis. He wondered then if the Emperor ever had the same doubts about His creations. If He were to be given a choice, would He too destroy what He had created? Vulkan supposed it was too late for that now,

or perhaps that was what he, Ferrus, Corax, Perturabo and the others were doing by bringing Horus to heel? How Konrad must be laughing now…

Vulkan had not realised his thoughts had made him pause, his gauntleted fingers poised to touch the haft of his spear, until T'kell spoke again.

'I hope your indecision represents a change of heart, primarch,' said the Forgemaster.

If only he knew the primarch's inner turmoil in that moment; but then, Vulkan supposed, it was better that he did not.

'It does not. The artefacts must be destroyed. I am bound for Isstvan, so cannot do it myself, which is why you must, T'kell.'

'Then what *is* wrong, primarch?'

Instead of the truth, Vulkan settled on a lie. He did not like lying to his sons, but it was small compared to the lies that had begun to unfold across the nascent Imperium, lies of false gods and brothers killing brothers. Surely these were greater lies, for to consider them anything else was beyond countenance.

'I believed I had chosen poorly, although this feels right,' he said, gripping the hammer *Dawnbringer*. 'Fitting. Perhaps its epithet will see my brother illuminated after all.'

It felt like a hollow thing to say. Ever since his last meeting with Horus, Vulkan knew deep down that another encounter between them would end in blood. The greater lies, he reminded himself, within which were woven a thread of truth.

'Primarch, I beseech you,' said T'kell, with something like desperation in his voice as he bowed on one knee. 'Please do not ask me to do this. At least save *something*.'

Vulkan would have remonstrated with his Forgemaster for such weakness had he not seen T'kell's actions for what they truly were: hope. He still believed that his father's creations could be used for good, to end war.

'There are weapons here that can destroy worlds, my son,' he said, regarding the inside of the vault.

'Or save them from destruction,' T'kell replied, 'in the *right* hands.'

'Mine?' asked Vulkan, looking down to meet T'kell's gaze. He saw the plea in his eyes, but also the pride. It gave Vulkan hope.

'Yes! Or Lord Dorn, or Guilliman. Even Russ!'

'Rise, Forgemaster. I would not have one of my sons beg me on his knees,' said Vulkan, and had to fight down his anger at seeing a Salamanders

legionary so humbled. I am a teacher, he thought to himself, not a king to be paid fealty to. Leave that pomposity to Guilliman – I'll have none of it.

'I am driven to it, primarch,' T'kell replied, but was back on his feet again.

Yes, thought Vulkan, T'kell is the right choice. If there is even a chance that my craft can be put to good use in spite of what is to come, then T'kell is a worthy custodian of that charge.

'Very well.'

'My lord?'

Vulkan faced him.

'I said, very well. Something should remain. If I destroy everything, then I have given up on hope and on seeing loyalty and honour endure in my brothers. I won't do that.'

T'kell looked relieved, but Vulkan knew his mood would change as soon as he gave his next order.

'You are to remain here, T'kell. You won't come to the Isstvan System – your place is now on Nocturne and Prometheus.'

'But, primarch–'

'Do not defy me a second time,' Vulkan warned. 'I am not *that* tolerant.' T'kell bowed his head.

He had planned on taking the Forgemaster with him, but he was glad now that he had an excuse not to. Vulkan felt the task his father had appointed them on Isstvan ill-omened. It was not because Horus was an excellent military leader, or a greater warrior – there were both better leaders and greater warriors amongst his brothers – it was the change in the Warmaster's spirit that bothered Vulkan the most, and all that it portended. If he could change, if the Crusade could alter his perception…

Vulkan banished these thoughts. Nothing would change what was to come, but this – what he was about to ask T'kell to do – this he could still influence.

'You shall become Forgefather, and keeper of the artefacts in this vault.'

'Forgefather?' said T'kell, confusion written upon his face. 'Am I not your Forgemaster, my lord?'

'Of course. A legionary can be more than one thing, T'kell. I am entrusting you with this duty, just as I entrusted you with the vault.'

'What duty, primarch? Name it, and it shall be done.'

‘To act as custodian. To swear you will protect these artefacts and should anything happen to me, ensure they are well hidden, far from those who would seek to use them poorly.’

Again, Vulkan saw the pride in his son’s eyes, but also the pain. He had no desire to leave his primarch’s side, but would do it anyway. That’s how Vulkan knew he had chosen well.

T’kell saluted fervently. ‘I swear it, Lord Vulkan.’

‘Good. Choose seven to remain, and only seven. One for each of our realms on Nocturne.’

‘There are thousands in here, primarch. How can I possibly–’

‘Indeed there are,’ said Vulkan. As he armoured himself for war, Vulkan found his mind drifting back to his last meeting with Horus. He would need to have words with Ferrus before this was begun. The Gorgon had a temper not unlike the volcanic peaks of Medusa, but he would need to channel that before entering into a confrontation with Horus and the other renegades. In his abstraction, he had almost forgotten T’kell, but as he was leaving, he reminded him again of what he would allow.

‘Seven, Forgefather, that is what your primarch decrees. I go to join with Ferrus’ fleet.’ He felt a deep sense of foreboding that he kept from his son, that this would be the last time he would see T’kell or the vault. ‘See it is done before I return.’

ONE

Mustering the garrison

A conflagration raged across the dark landscape of the ship's furnace. Thrust up from the ground the twisted silhouettes of the artefacts reminded T'kell of broken fingers. Tendrils of flame roamed the armourglass chamber like hungry scavengers, devouring everything and spitting forth smoke to obscure this grim vista of uncreation. It tasted acrid and bitter, rising up in all consuming fumes. Through the gaps in the smoke, snatches of structure and form were revealed. A blade blackened by fire, melting. A hull twisted by the immense temperature of the furnace.

Everything burned, and he was the architect of it.

From an observation platform, T'kell looked down upon the destruction he had wrought and wept.

Heat prickled his skin, even through the armourglass.

'I preside over a massacre…' he murmured, gripping the haft of his thunder hammer for reassurance. 'Such glory and beauty rendered moot by my unmaking of it.'

T'kell had little poetry in his soul – logic made no room for it – but felt it seize him roughly in that moment of abject annihilation.

Few warlords could claim such a feat of desolation, and yet he, a Forgemaster, a servant of craft and restoration, had done this.

T'kell smiled bitterly at the irony.

Forgefather, he reminded himself.

'This grief…' he uttered to the shadows, 'it is as if you have died again.'

Though he had not borne witness to the primarch's passing, T'kell knew in his heart that his father was gone.

It was said that their voice, the voice of the recently deceased, was the first thing to fade from memory. For T'kell it would never fade, even at the end. His father's last words to him were ingrained as indelibly as the honour scars carved into his onyx-black flesh.

The unthinkable had come to pass. Ash was all that remained.

'Is nothing to be spared, brother?'

He recognised the voice as belonging to Rahz Obek.

In his reverie, T’kell had almost forgotten the Firebearer was also present at the burning of Vulkan’s artefacts, both of them standing in what amounted to little more than a corridor from which to witness the destruction.

His armour was scalloped green ceramite, furnished with a cloak of red, leathery drake hide. A helmet hung from his belt by a strap, a dark fin of metal cutting it into two equal hemispheres. A shorter version, also deep ocean green, divided his scalp, but was made of shorn hair, not metal. As ever, he appeared stern. Rahz Obek was stoic as granite, a trait that extended to his emotions as well as his deeds. His question was asked not as a plea, nor affected by grief, but as an enquiry of fact.

‘This ship in which we stand, the weapon it carries on its hull,’ said T’kell, looking to the upper vaults and the flickering shadows that haunted them. His bionic eye auto-focused as it chased details in the darkness above. ‘And five other artefacts. Seven in all, one for each of the realms.’

Obek took a step towards the armourglass; it was all that stood between them and the furnace. His red eyes narrowed as he sought the shapes of the things T’kell had been charged to destroy. He had never seen the wonders of Vulkan’s creation – even the ship was new to him – and T’kell assumed curiosity drove his brother-captain.

An inferno raged inside the great heart-forge of the *Chalice of Fire*, as red as the Forgemaster’s armour. Nothing ever made could withstand its heat. And there was nothing but blackened metal and a growing field of ash for Obek to see.

‘A pity to see father’s work undone, but better that it should not fall into a traitor’s hands.’

‘He said much the same to me,’ uttered T’kell. ‘No wonder he chose you to lead the garrison.’

Captain Obek stiffened at the remark, confirming what T’kell had always suspected – Obek thought he was being punished. Prometheus, the moon of Nocturne, its space port and barracks, was not a noble fortress to protect with his life; it was his prison to be incarcerated in until his death.

‘Though,’ said T’kell when no reply was forthcoming, ‘I understand you have a different name for yourselves.’

Obek half turned, and his draconic war-plate caught the firelight in such a way as to give an even more feral aspect.

‘There is only one name that matters,’ he said at last.

At this, T’kell nodded. ‘Yes.’

The inferno had died to a flickering flame, the roar becoming a dulcet crackling. Smoke had blackened the armourglass as if hiding the shame of what had been done. Or rather *undone*.

‘You said you needed my help, Forgefather?’ asked Obek.

‘It was his last order to me before he went to Isstvan Five.’

Again, Obek reacted, this time a hardening of the jaw.

‘And what would *you* have me do?’

‘What you have never done,’ said T’kell. ‘Leave Prometheus.’

Zandu saw the burning man in his dreams. The figure had no face, no markings on his armour from which to discern his Legion or rank, but he burned. Eternally.

He could not remember how long he had been seeing the burning man, or even the triggering event for the vision manifesting in the first place, only that it was ever-present, gnawing at the edge of his conscious mind and waiting for Zandu to let down his guard so that the apparition could be born again as a nightmare rendered in flame.

At first, Zandu thought *he* might be the burning man, and that he was looking into a dream-mirror that portended his own death. The sense of imminent mortality remained whenever the burning man came to visit, but after several such meetings Zandu came to realise that the apparition was someone else, some*thing* else, an anachronism or a future echo.

When asked, Chaplain Zau’ull had suggested it could be a metaphor for penance, that the burning man might represent one of the fiery dooms that awaited the wicked and the cruel.

Not since Nikaea had Librarians walked amongst their number, and Zandu did not believe he was such an individual, latent or otherwise. He only knew that every time he closed his eyes, the burning man would come to him, his body coursing in perpetual flame. A legionary forever damned.

As he woke, Zandu became aware of a feverish sweat lathering his body. A spume of breath ghosted in the air despite the stultifying heat of the chamber. It, like his dream, was a phantom, inexplicable, impossible to grasp.

‘Merciful Vulkan,’ he gasped, the burden of the memory still heavy. His hearts raced and he willed them to slow down.

Breathe, breathe…

Naked, he stepped from a dais through a ring of shimmering haze and padded across a carpet of burning coals. The chamber was dark, but Zandu

saw well enough without the light. He had missed something though and, as he reached for his armour and the sheathed blade upon the nearby rack, a voice intruded on the quietude.

‘Dark dreams, Brother Zandu?’

Zandu turned. ‘Obek.’

‘They haven’t addled your reflexes, Firefist.’ The brother-captain nodded at the blade in Zandu’s hand, which he had drawn on instinct.

‘They do little for my peace of mind,’ he admitted, lowering the short sword. Zandu smiled, and wasn’t surprised to see it go unreciprocated.

‘Perhaps a change of scenery will help.’

Zandu’s brow furrowed, but Obek had already turned. ‘Don your armour and then come and find me.’

The blade slid through the servitor’s guard, piercing its power core and abruptly ending the duel inside the battle cage. Blood and oil stained the floor.

Ak’nun Xen left the sword impaled, still trembling from the strength of his blow, as he went to the weapons rack and took up a spear. Admiring the sharpness of the tip in the sodium half-light, he banged the ferrule hard on the floor of the battle cage to begin the next bout.

A lumbering hulk of a servitor came for him on reverse-jointed limbs. From its left appendage an electro-flail rapidly unspooled and then crackled as it activated. A studded glove encased its right arm, exuding an energy hum.

Xen tossed the spear up, caught it in a reverse grip and threw it. The servitor advanced two more steps before the spear took out its vital organs, again ending the duel. Next came a hammer and a fresh opponent, then a glaive and after that three variations of chain weapon. Xen had reached his ninth bout when he felt a presence behind him that made him stop. He was wearing loose-fitting training fatigues and sat down crossed-legged easily, his back away from the door to the battle cage as he addressed the newcomer.

‘Have you come to fight me, brother-captain?’ he asked. ‘Am I to be instructed, or have I already learned all I must?’

Xen thought he heard of snort of derision, but saw it for what it was. Caution.

As he waited for an answer, Xen felt the scars on his back itch as he flexed his shoulder blades and stretched to keep stiffness at bay whilst he

rested.

A litany of honours cut curves and whorls into his skin in the sigil-dialect of Nocturne. Symbolism mattered to the people of the volcanic world and so it mattered to its transhuman sons too. Xen had won almost every honour possible for him to obtain. Few warriors in the Legion, alive or dead, were so decorated. But a mark had eluded him and now would forever do so: the rising flame, sigil of Vulkan's Pyre Guard.

Memory of it, or rather lack of it, caused a mote of anger to rise in Xen's heart. He knew it was unworthy but had no means of shackling the emotion. Rahz's voice brought him back round.

'How many more of those things do you intend to kill, Flamesmote?'

Cybernetic bodies and parts littered the battle cage. Oil painted it in arterial sprays like a pugilist's canvas. Eighteen more servitor drones stood in their ready stations, inert, eyes dull and absent of motility.

'All of them.'

Rahz came forwards, encroaching into Xen's peripheral vision. The brother-captain had his armour on. He was also armed, a bolter-flamer strapped to his back. Kneeling down, he picked up the hammer Xen had used to stave in a servitor's metal skull.

'Is there something you need, brother-captain?' Xen asked, unable to keep the impatience out of his voice, after a brief silence.

Rahz set down the hammer and stood up.

'I may have a better use for your sword arm.'

Far from instilling him with a sense of righteous purpose, the Vow had left Zau'ull enervated. Even in the Reclusiam, he could find no succour. As the serfs bathed and cleansed his armour with unguents, he reflected on the bitterness he felt and how it had come to pass.

Even gripping his rosarius and reciting the canticles of faith and endurance brought him no comfort. He called to mind the lectures of Nomus Rhy'tan on self-sacrifice and the garnering of strength through suffering, but still clarity would not come and the heady fug of despair weighing him down refused to lift.

'Vulkan is dead,' he murmured, causing the serfs to stir and glance, afraid, at the Chaplain's dark mood. His war-plate felt heavy as if the power feeding it had bled dry, and his limbs ached. A stifling air seemed to fill his war-helm and he reached for the skeletal faceplate with a trembling, gauntleted hand.

Is this grief? he wondered. *Or the absence of faith? How can I minister to these warriors if my own spirit is broken?*

Zau'ull stared until his eyes met the tattooed face of Gor'og Krask.

'Brother-Chaplain…?'

It took Zau'ull a few seconds to realise Krask had addressed him. Krask awaited an answer, except Zau'ull had no memory of the question, only that he had been asked. The reveries were happening all too often.

'I came here, to the Reclusium,' offered Krask, his drake-scaled plate a thing of terrible beauty and palpable violence, 'for sanctification. You said you would perform the rites over my armour.'

Zau'ull nodded, still weary but remembering. 'Yes… yes, of course. Step forwards, brother.'

Seemingly at ease again, Krask obeyed and bowed his head before the Chaplain. Krask cut a huge figure in his armour and Zau'ull had to look up at the Firedrake.

Banishing the serfs, glad to be rid of their cloying presence, Zau'ull uttered the rites, but the benediction felt hollow.

It was.

He spoke of Vulkan, of his return to the mountain and presence beyond death.

'Is he with us, Brother-Chaplain?' asked Krask, his tone hopeful and devout.

'Yes.'

'You are of the Igniax?'

'I am, brother.'

'And can you see the primarch still?'

Zau'ull paused, recognising that the sons who remained needed hope, something to shore up their spiritual wounds. Zau'ull had heard talk of resurrection. One of the legionaries who had brought Vulkan back, one of the Pyre Guard no less. It had been a miracle, having crossed the storm and returned home. Rhy'tan had told him right before the attack – 'Artellus Numeon claims that Vulkan isn't dead'. The miraculous was not fated to last. Vulkan had stayed dead, his body now ash and all hope of his revivification ash along with it.

A bitter blow, the latest in many that had led to this moment and Zau'ull's crisis.

He said none of this to Krask, and answered him instead, saying, ‘I can still see the primarch. He is with us always.’

Krask raised his head as the rites concluded. Nodding to Zau’ull, he noticed the Chaplain staring into a shadowy alcove.

‘Is he here now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Vulkan lives,’ Krask murmured. Since Isstvan, this phrase had become a defiant battle cry and statement of belief that had reached as far as Nocturne. Over the last few days – or for some, months – it had become an acknowledgement of the opposite and a wilting reassurance that the primarch lived on in his sons of the forge.

‘Yes,’ Zau’ull replied softly, ‘Vulkan lives,’ but as Krask left the Reclusiam and the Chaplain to his thoughts, Zau’ull saw nothing in the alcove but darkness.

Alone, finally, he removed his helm to take a shuddering breath, then snarled as one of the serfs returned. The lowly female recoiled and shrank before the Chaplain, who felt immediately contrite. Zau’ull reached out to apologise, but stopped when he saw the proffered scroll in the serf’s tiny hands.

‘What is this?’

‘L-Lord Obek sent it.’

The brother-captain did not approve of formality.

Zau’ull barely noticed the serf retreat back into the shadows as he read what was inked upon the scroll. His eyes narrowed as he reached the end.

‘What are you up to, Obek?’

Zeb’du Varr watched as Nocturne burned.

He liked it.

On the moon of Prometheus, the Vigil Hall offered an unparalleled vista of the world below. Hewn from obsidian armourglass, it could withstand a broadside from a cruiser or even a star fort. Resilient though it certainly was, it made for a much better watchtower than a battlement. From this vantage in the bastion orbiting high above Nocturne, Varr saw everything in wondrous slowness.

It was the Time of Trial, when the world voiced its anger and its people suffered or died, and yet survived…

Swathes of pyroclastic cloud rolled like tsunamis across the surface, and the gouts of fire spewing from its volcanoes were distant blooms of flaring

light. Each fresh eruption expelled a huge trunk of smoke, billowing upwards into a pearlescent white dome framed by a ragged grey crown of smoke and cinder.

As he keenly observed the detonating caldera, Varr had to imagine the thunder because the almost balletic display played out in silence. He imagined the fire too, the endless swathes of it… the scent of smoke, the acrid taste in his mouth, the near-suffocating heat. Varr had to resist the urge to ignite a fire of his own as he watched the trauma of the pyroclasm unfold. Others in the Legion shared his love of fire, but none possessed a mania quite as pronounced as Varr.

‘Beautiful…’ he whispered, edging closer, and caught sight of his reflection in the glass.

Eyes the colour of hot coals glared hungrily from a face ravaged by knots of scar tissue. His skin looked leathern and cratered from countless burns. His lips had almost fused to his flesh, and were nearly indiscernible from the rest of his face. Nearly hairless, his scalp had sprouted wiry tufts between canyons of self-inflicted burn wounds.

Varr knew he appeared monstrous, but accepted it as a burden of his calling. His only regret in that moment was the absence of his flamers, and he clenched and unclenched his gauntleted fists as if enacting a kinetic memory.

‘I see you,’ he uttered to the fiery hell below. ‘I see you, father.’

Brother-Captain Obek was waiting, but Varr had needed to experience this first, to *watch* Nocturne burn as he always did during the Time of Trial, even though it never left him sated.

TWO

All the honour that remains

Fifty-one legionaries had gathered in the vault.

All Firedrakes bar one, though only Krask and his warriors wore Tartaros-pattern Terminator armour. The others wore Mark IV and V power armour, painted green as befitted their Legion and each with a mantle of salamander hide. Zau'ull had black armour to signify his position amongst the Chaplaincy, and one other amongst the throng wore the red associated with Mars. The Terminators had attached their salamander hides to their shoulder guards, whilst the rest had cloaks of scale hanging down their backs. In spite of the apparent differences between the two grades of armour, all had a draconic aspect in common. Edges of individual plates were scalloped, echoing the scaled texture of their cloaks or shoulder mantles; and the legionaries' war-helms, although different in form, all had toothed mouth-grilles or in some instances had been fashioned to resemble a drake head. Again, Zau'ull was the exception. His war-helm resembled an avatar of death, a fleshless skull.

Even made diminutive by the sheer size of the vault, the Salamanders looked formidable and ready for war. Many *ached* for it and felt that the need for the garrison had robbed them of deserved glory. Certainly, their surroundings were glorious enough.

Prometheus had several artefact chambers, but this was the largest. The Igneous Vault. It had also once belonged to Vulkan. The footfalls of the warriors who congregated there echoed loudly from its ornate walls despite the ash underfoot. Craft and artistry were evident in the vault's aesthetic. Statuary had been carved into long metal ribs that arced all the way to a filigreed ceiling, where the wingless serpents of ancient Nocturne swam and fought in a sea of fire. An obsidian veneer gave the scene lustre and caught snatches of reflected light from a thousand guttering auto-sconces.

The sculpted deep drakes cavorting in the heart-blood of the world had once looked down upon a sprawling portrait of tribesmen abroad on the Scorian Plain, wrought into the metal of the vault. Both were stirring examples of the primarch's peerless gift of creation.

Ak’nun Xen spoke first, to a figure standing apart from the others. The one who was clad in red.

‘Forgefather, why have you summoned us here?’ he asked, his voice echoing for a few seconds before fading into silence. Xen favoured blades over the traditional concussion weapons of his Legion and had a habit of holding the pommel of each of his two swords whenever they were sheathed. It gave him a predatory air, of one who is always eager for battle. He was also one of the garrison’s standard bearers and as such was expected to carry the company’s banner into war. Xen could not remember a time when he had unfurled it.

Waiting patiently at the head of the cadre, Rahz Obek scowled. Several others gave disapproving glances too, especially Krask and his warriors.

‘Do you know what we are standing in, Ak’nun Xen?’ asked T’kell.

‘Ash, brother. An ocean of it.’

‘Fool!’ hissed Zau’ull. ‘It is more than that.’

Xen gave him a sideways look, but did nothing more.

All of the Salamanders legionaries carried their helmets – either mag-locked to their armour or simply held in their arms – out of respect for their surroundings and the Forgefather. Zau’ull did not deign to look back at Xen. Instead, he met the fervent gaze of Zeb’du Varr. Since their apotheosis to legionaries, they had adopted different names, but a biological bond existed between them that went deeper than mere sword brother.

Zeb’du bowed his head to his brother, eyes alive with vigour as if he saw something in the vault beyond the ken of the others.

You know, don’t you? You see.

‘It is the legacy of our primarch,’ T’kell explained to Xen. His voice coaxed Zau’ull from his thoughts. ‘It is the ashes of his great works. This vault used to be full, a cache of wonders like no other in the known galaxy, all wrought by our father’s hammer. Upon his death, he charged me with ensuring none of it fell into the wrong hands.’

Some shook their heads, appalled at what their Forgefather had been ordered to do. Others, like Krask, kneeled, *actually* kneeled down, in spite of the difficulty of doing it wearing Terminator armour, to touch and hold what remained.

Even Xen appeared disquieted, though he did his best to mask it.

‘How did we not know of this?’ Zandu asked.

‘Father kept much to himself, it would seem. I only know what little he saw fit to tell me.’ T’kell spread his hands, one of which ended in five digit-sized mechadendrites, ‘Such as this vault, its contents and its purpose.’

Zandu shook his head; the primarch’s wisdom eluded him. ‘We could have used these weapons to kill Horus and end the war.’

‘I think that’s what he was worried about. He didn’t want to kill his brothers, least of all Horus.’

‘They had no such qualms,’ Xen chimed in.

‘Traitors are ever quick to resort to murder,’ Zau’ull said sadly.

Silence fell as Zandu’s question remained unresolved, and they all stared at the wreckage of Vulkan’s legacy as if they’d had to endure his death a second time.

T’kell observed them all keenly.

Only Rahz Obek remained unmoved. His eyes narrowed though, as he watched T’kell, knowing the Forgemaster must have had the ash removed from the *Chalice of Fire* and brought here.

You thought they might refuse, didn’t you?

‘We have suffered,’ said T’kell. ‘*You* have suffered. Much about these times makes little sense. I am a creature of reason and logic, but I find nothing reasonable or logical about the situation in which we find ourselves, or the decisions we must make for the sake of duty. But make them we must, for to do anything other would be to cast in our lot with those we profess to despise and pit ourselves against.’ He looked around at the fifty legionaries standing before him, as if measuring the honour and duty that he had just spoken of in each of them. ‘Bound to Prometheus, standing as its garrison, it is no place for such warriors. When the world burned below, what did you do?’

‘We watched,’ said Krask, the bitterness in his voice resonating with every other Salamanders legionary in the Igneous Vault. He rose to his feet with a churn of agitated servos.

‘Aye,’ uttered Zandu, ‘we watched whilst the Death Guard rained hell upon our earth.’

‘Held fast by duty,’ added Obek, and clasped forearms with the hulking Zandu.

‘You are not the garrison,’ said T’kell, slowly shaking his head. ‘That is not what you call yourselves.’

‘We are the Unscarred,’ answered Zau’ull, and saw his brother nod again.

‘Denied glory,’ said Xen.

‘Denied death,’ Zandu corrected him with stern disapproval. ‘And I note you still wear your honour markings, brother.’

Xen scowled as the fires of his anger were stoked. ‘They are mine by right of deed.’

‘You are entirely too vainglorious, Ak’nun Xen.’ All turned to Zeb’du Varr. For a moment, it was as if the primarch had returned and this legionary was his avatar. Varr smiled then, dispelling the illusion as he revealed the mania in his eyes, but Xen made no riposte. T’kell continued.

‘Vulkan gave me a sacred duty,’ he said, regaining the attention of those present. ‘It was to be his last before he went to Isstvan V. He foresaw this war and he feared it. Not for his soul or his body, or even his sons, but for the harm it would cause mankind. And he feared the evil that could be done with the wonders he had made, a legacy meant to ensure the success of the Great Crusade, not weapons of destruction to be used against fellow legionaries in an internecine war.

‘He bade me destroy them, but I am not the primarch and I do not have his resolve or strength of will. I pleaded with him not to unmake everything. Our father heeded me.’

‘So, this is not all of it, then?’ asked Zau’ull, gesturing to the sea of ash underfoot. ‘Some of his works still endure?’

T’kell nodded solemnly, as if the existence of these artefacts were a great burden to him.

Xen gave a curt laugh. It was mirthless and derisory. ‘This theatre,’ he said, ‘what was it meant to achieve, to have us stand here in this tomb of ash whilst you tell us of your duty?’

‘I needed to convince you.’

‘Convince us of what?’

Obek had seen and heard enough. He stepped forwards.

‘Enough, Forgefather. Tell them what it is you wish of us.’

T’kell smiled thinly. ‘I need your help, to fulfill Vulkan’s last command to me.’

‘Then ask it,’ said Zandu, his mind apparently already made up.

‘Seven artefacts are left, but they must be taken far from Prometheus and hidden so that no one will ever find them.’

‘If they are so dangerous, Forgefather, then why not destroy them too?’ asked Xen.

‘Because when this war is over, the galaxy and our Legion, should it survive, shall have need of them. And because I could not destroy them all, and begged for the primarch to allow me to spare these few.

‘I need brothers in arms,’ T’kell told him. ‘And you need a different purpose, to be unscarred no more and once again feel worthy of your warrior names. This is all the honour that remains.’

None argued.

‘I could speak for the company,’ said Obek, ‘and say we do this, for Vulkan and the Legion, although I admit I’m reticent to leave Prometheus’ defences weakened, but it has to be each warrior’s right to choose.’

‘Justly spoken, brother,’ said Zandu.

T’kell nodded to Obek, he who but for a quirk of fate would have served the Legion on Isstvan V and met his doom and glory there.

‘Well then,’ T’kell said, ‘by an unsheathing of blades, who will take up this trial with me?’

It took but a moment as the vault resounded to the din of scraping metal, and fifty hammers, swords and chainblades were held aloft as one.

THREE

These deeds we have wrought

The *Chalice of Fire* rode the empyrean tides like a behemoth of the deep pitted against a turbulent sea. Mercifully, the cadre of the Unscarred and the several thousand crew and servitors it took to get the forge ship under way had sailed away from the Ruinstorm, following a route known only to T'kell and the ship's Navigator.

After several months of warp-transit, they neared a Mandeville point of a small star system called Boron XIII that had no recorded life and whose contact with the Imperium had ceased over a century ago. It possessed four planets, orbiting around a star whose solar mass could support human habitation on one of the worlds without burning out or evaporating its natural water supplies.

As the *Chalice of Fire* emerged into real space, trailing ethereal corposant in its wake, the frigidity that came with deep warp-space travel began to recede and the various ship systems hummed back into activation. The bridge became alive with industry as the captain hustled his crew and began to make preparations for approach according to T'kell's instructions.

'So then,' said Rahz Obek, standing alongside his Forgefather and looking out from a large observation blister, 'what awaits us down there?'

His gaze travelled through the darkness of space to the world slowly turning below them. The ship was still several hours out and Obek could discern nothing beyond the blue-grey hue of the planet and heavy banks of yellowish cloud that wreathed it.

'Honestly, brother,' T'kell said, 'I do not know. Beyond this point, I am as in the dark as you.'

'Did Vulkan tell you nothing else?'

'He gave me its location and a name. The Wrought. A weapons cache to contain the artefacts.'

'Which must be huge if it is to house this ship.'

T'kell nodded.

'I searched some of the ship's archives concerning the Great Crusade,' Obek went on. 'They were surprisingly comprehensive. This system was

mentioned but all detail of what transpired was redacted, if it ever existed in the first instance.'

'I know Vulkan came here alone, that of the entire Legion only he actually stepped onto the earth of this world.'

'And yet he did not name it. That surprises me. Remember Caldera?'

'Not personally, but I know of it.'

'When you said Vulkan had another cache, a second vault,' Obek said, 'I admit, I expected it to be there.'

'Perhaps that's why it isn't,' suggested T'kell. 'Perhaps Vulkan had other plans for Caldera.'

'We will never know…'

Obek trailed off into silence and they were faced with their inevitable grief once more. It had a habit of finding them when least expected, a knife of shadow that cut all the way to the bone.

Neither Salamanders legionary spoke for a while after that. They remained in each other's company, standing in companionable silence and deep in thought.

'The artefacts must stay aboard the *Chalice of Fire* when we make landfall,' T'kell said.

Obek nodded, the thought having already occurred to him. 'Krask and his men will stand guard. Zau'ull will want to remain behind too.'

'You have spoken with him recently?'

'No, but Krask has. Our Brother-Chaplain claims Vulkan is with us, in spirit if nothing else.'

'And your thoughts?'

Reflected in the armourglass, Obek's face darkened. 'I know when he is lying.'

'He suffers.'

'As do we all, brother.'

'Him more than most.'

'You know, Forgefather, you are remarkably empathic for a Techmarine.'

T'kell smiled, though given the cybernetics on his face it turned into more of a grimace. 'I am my father's son.'

Obek replied with the equivalent of a facial shrug, as they lapsed back into silence.

Through the viewing portal, the clouded world edged closer and their answers with it.

A pair of Thunderhawks speared through the void, engine burn flaring coldly in the darkness. They flew in formation, staying close as they hit the upper atmosphere and took the brunt of re-entry. The gunships bucked but held their line even as their prows glowed hot and red.

Then they were through, leaving the chill of the void behind and the gargantuan presence of the *Chalice of Fire* now anchored in low orbit above, with its precious cargo still aboard. As they entered a bank of cloud, the pilots of both Thunderhawks eased back and let the turbines take up the slack.

As they levelled off into a horizontal approach vector, a request from both ships crackled across the vox.

'*Destination coordinates, Forgemaster?*'

'What do you see, pilot?'

'*We have entered a fog bank. I'll need to descend.*'

'Do so.'

A few seconds lapsed, and a brief roar of engine noise interrupted the dulcet reverberation of the ship's hull as the Thunderhawk dipped sharply to clear the fog bank.

'*Picking up residuals on the sensors,*' the pilot said as he returned on the vox.

T'kell maintained the dialogue as the others sat silently in their launch cages. Two squads, Varr and Zandu. 'Clarify.'

'*Low levels of radiation, but rising.*'

'Any structures?'

'*Only ruins.*'

T'kell exchanged a glance with Obek. *Was this what Vulkan had intended? Were they even in the right place?*

'*Wait… Something on the horizon. Moving fast…*'

A blurt of static broke off the feed for a few seconds.

'*Contact!*'

'Identify, pilot,' said Obek, taking over as military commander of the mission.

'*Sixteenth Legion, brother-captain.*' He sounded strained. A second later, the passengers in the hold knew why, as the gunship banked sharply and an alert siren began to howl.

A muted explosion peppered the hull with shrapnel, then came the denser impacts of shells, most likely from a heavy bolter. The hold shuddered. A

savage jerk felt like a hammer blow. Smoke began to issue through the internal vision slits.

‘*Taking fire…*’

In the circumstances, the pilot’s report was superfluous.

Preceded by a high-pitched whine that went from distant to acute in an eye-blink, a second hit ripped open part of the fuselage. Zandu carried the brunt of it, the sudden fire and intensifying noise all but smothering his pained shout.

Varr had him, but other than some scorching of his armour, Zandu looked none the worse for wear.

The pilot was oblivious, but knew they had been hit. He snarled, angry, ‘*Engaging.*’

A blurt of muffled but staccato heavy bolter fire sounded through the hull. Most of the Salamanders legionaries made ready for combat, but there was nothing they could do whilst the Thunderhawk rocketed through the sky. They were in the hands of the pilots now.

Another jerk buffeted the hull, harder than wind shear, which had become a nerve-shredding screech, but not as punishing as the first or second blow.

A glancing hit, T’kell realised as he got back on the vox.

‘What are they flying, pilot?’

There was a short pause as another evasive manoeuvre sent them banking in the opposite direction. Judging by the ambient sound, T’kell imagined the paired Thunderhawks weaving around each other’s slipstreams as they sought to outwit their attackers.

‘*Land Speeders, heavily armed,*’ the pilot replied at last. ‘*One is down and on fire. Two have disengaged. Should we pursue?*’

‘Immediately, and jam their comms,’ T’kell said. ‘It’s possible we were unlucky and this is a patrol. No one else must know we’re here or why.’

The pilot relayed an affirmative and the gunships gave chase.

‘Sons of Horus,’ Obek had to shout, and the speaking of that name caused every pair of coal-red eyes in the hold to fall upon him. ‘What are they doing here?’

T’kell shook his head almost without realising he had done it.

‘Hunt them down, pilot,’ he said into the vox, and then to Obek, ‘Let’s find out.’

A short-lived chase followed, but the Land Speeders were no match for the faster and more heavily armed Thunderhawks. As the engine roar

diminished and the gunship gently circled around, T’kell knew the threat was neutralised.

Obek was already on the vox.

‘Conduct an aerial sweep. Make sure they’re alone, and then take us in for a closer look.’

It took a few minutes to sweep and secure the area, during which no further Speeders or reinforcements could be found, suggesting the ones that came across the Salamanders had done so by chance and were a single patrol.

As one of the Thunderhawks flew skywards, monitoring with sensors and concealed by the cloud layer, the second briefly touched down to disgorge six legionaries in power armour. The ramp was already closing and the gunship rising as T’kell led the small squad in the direction of a downed Land Speeder. They kept low and dispersed, using the ruins to cover their approach.

An electrical storm cracked the sky with jolts of violet lightning and a heavy gale rolled off the dirt plain, kicking up squalls of dust and small pieces of debris. Zandu felt them rattle against his armour, but kept his eyes on the unmoving forms slung across the Speeder as he approached it.

Sons of Horus. The rank markings and colour of their armour were clear. Zandu didn’t believe in chance or providence or coincidence. He believed in what he saw and experienced. Nothing more. This encounter warned him to be wary.

‘Brother-sergeant,’ T’kell said, ‘are your injuries not severe?’

Zandu had felt it at the time, but shook his head. He gestured for the four legionaries of his squad to advance ahead. They did so as one, bolters held up to their shoulders, right retinal lenses aimed down the stocks. Zandu had a bolter too, Phobos-pattern with a drake-toothed bayonet attached to the stock and an underslung volkite.

‘Armour took the worst of it,’ said Zandu, slapping the side of his helm as the integrity read-out flashed red for a moment before turning back to green. ‘Just needed to stretch my legs, Forgefather.’

T’kell nodded, his attention only half on Zandu as he scrolled through his internal data-feed. Zandu could hear it processing and saw the blank-eyed expression of the Techmarine as he interfaced with it.

‘Radiation levels are increasing,’ T’kell said after a few more seconds. ‘I am having difficulty pinpointing a nexus for it. Readings suggest it’s latent.

Possibly atomics – the air is saturated with it. How are your armour seals, brother-sergeant?'

'Functioning, Forgemaster.'

T'kell didn't respond. They had arrived at their destination.

As the squad reached the downed Speeder they fanned out and each took up a sentry position, eyes on the wreck and on the immediate area beyond it. The other two transports had been annihilated and had ditched much farther out. T'kell was content to examine this one.

Upon close inspection, though, it became obvious that both crew were dead. The pilot's chest had been blown out, probably by a shell detonation. His rib carapace had split down the middle and any internal organs that remained inside were pulped. The gunner had been scythed in half and his lower body had landed several metres from the crash site, whilst his clenched fists ensured his upper half remained locked to the multi-melta that sagged on its pintle mounting.

Knowing how resilient his former brothers-in-arms could be, Zandu made sure neither legionary still clung to life.

'Both dead,' he said, beckoning T'kell forwards, who had waited for the confirmation. 'What do you hope to find?' he asked, as the Forgemaster used his mechadendrites to interface with the Land Speeder's control console. The steering column had been wrecked and the sensor display spat sparks through a broken screen of dark glass.

'It is what I hope *not* to find,' T'kell replied and blanked out again as he roamed for data in what was left of the Land Speeder's rudimentary cogitator.

As the Forgemaster worked, Zandu could properly survey the landscape. He surmised a city had once stood where the Speeder had come down, before being flattened into oblivion. Vines encroached upon this suburban shell. Moss and lichen shawled its broken ramparts, and colonies of insects had made nests of its stony hollows. Edges of the ruins suggested a district; structures delineated where roads might have been. Tufts of coarse grass intruded through cracks in the sundered highway, and more than once Zandu caught a glimpse of some timid prey-creature skittering through the city. It was as if nature, not man, had risen up and overtaken this place. Grimly, he realised the loose rock underfoot was actually bone, half buried under dirt and wind-borne debris. Femurs, teeth, even the odd partial skull lay scattered across the plain like some horrific mass grave.

Zandu was a warrior. He knew war. These people had been destroyed… or destroyed themselves. And long ago. His attention was drawn to a line of graffiti scrawled across one of the few walls still standing but begrimed by age. In Low Gothic, it read: *These deeds we have wrought*.

It looked like it had been carved into the rock with a knife or some other blade. Scraps of uniform clung to some of the bones, and he could swear that some of them didn't look Imperial. Was this what Vulkan had been so afraid of, mankind's capacity to destroy itself? What beautiful and terrible wonders had he fashioned?

'Primarch have mercy,' he whispered.

T'kell slammed his fist against the Speeder's console, breaking into Zandu's thoughts.

'Nothing,' he muttered.

'And yet you still seemed troubled.'

'I am. I found nothing to datasift. The cogitator is dead. I cannot exload, so a warning could have been sent but there is no way to be sure.'

Zandu looked to the horizon. He could hear the distant passage of the gunship prowling above.

'Skies are clear, except for us. If contact *was* made, we would have seen something by now.'

T'kell remained pensive, but he was considering something else. Zandu could guess what.

'You didn't expect anyone else to be here, did you?'

'No. This place was supposed to be barren, of no strategic or military significance.'

T'kell recalled the gunship, instructing it to land a few hundred metres outside of the crash site. Once the squad was back aboard, Obek met them with news.

'There's an outpost about twenty kilometres north of this position.'

'In use?'

'Unknown. It came up on the long-range augurs, so it must be large. The Wrought?'

'Perhaps. Thus far, nothing has been as I expected. We should keep the artefacts on board the *Chalice of Fire* for now, possibly indefinitely if this location has been compromised.'

'Agreed,' said Obek, relaying the order to the pilot and not bothering to ask where that left them if the Wrought were no longer viable. He scowled.

‘It feels as if we have an armed vortex grenade in our hands, ready to detonate.’

‘That is not so far from the truth, brother-captain,’ T’kell said. ‘Our father created much with his hammer, miracles of science and invention. I know, I have seen them. Peerless in their capacity to do great good, but also great ill. They are weapons, brother-captain.’

‘Weapons have capacity for neither good nor ill. Only their wielders have that.’

‘Precisely, brother.’

FOUR

Our father’s legacy

Zau’ull pressed his gauntleted hand against the side of the Armarium in the hopes of feeling closer to Vulkan. T’kell had forged the repository for the sole purpose of transporting the artefacts to the Wrought. Zau’ull had thought he was alone in the *Chalice of Fire*’s lower depths until Krask came to join him.

‘I envy you, Firefather.’

‘Why is that, brother?’ Zau’ull asked, abruptly self-conscious as he let his hand fall away. It lingered, suspended a few inches from the metal before it came back to his side and he turned to face the Wyvern. This was Krask’s war-name, self-bestowed in the belief he embodied the fearsome prowess of its namesake. His men carried similar names, wearing them as if they were masks.

‘I envy your closeness to our father, his…’ and he struggled for a moment to think of the word, ‘…*presence* that you alone can feel.’

It fell just short of suggesting the idea that Vulkan’s spirit, his soul, lived on in some fashion. Such notions, even in an enlightened galaxy rapidly collapsing back into superstition, were still unfavourable.

‘Yes, his presence,’ Zau’ull said distantly.

‘It is a great honour to stand sentinel at the gate to our father’s legacy.’

Zau’ull smiled. ‘You have a poetic disposition, brother.’

Krask blinked once as if he didn’t understand the Chaplain’s meaning. His gaze strayed to the Armarium. It was large, the design nondescript despite what it contained. Five wonders, five miracles of Vulkan’s creation. T’kell had secured them within and only he, Obek and Zau’ull could open the repository’s gene-coded door without using force.

‘Beyond his personal war apparel, I have never seen our father’s works. I imagine they are something to behold.’

‘This very ship is amongst them, brother,’ Zau’ull said. ‘As is the weapon mounted upon its hull.’

The air felt stifling and made the chamber seem close despite its size. The metal of the deck beneath and the walls surrounding them were black. Soot

and cinder bled unceasingly through the vents, filling the corridors of the vessel with an acerbic odour redolent of the hundreds of forges and foundries below. The *Chalice of Fire* was no warship; it did not possess the weapons of a battle-barge, but it could create them.

‘It is a forge ship like no other,’ said Zau’ull.

‘The likes of which will never be seen again,’ uttered Krask, and the wonder in his eyes faded as quickly as it had been born.

Zau’ull felt it too. ‘No. It will not.’

‘And we shall die with it.’

‘Yes, we shall.’

Heavy footfalls echoed down a long corridor of a different ship, announcing the presence of the Salamanders legionary not affiliated with the Unscarred. His name was Saurian, and he wore a suit of draconic war-plate, Mark IV with a torn hide of lizard scale and tusked shoulder guards. A snarling helmet sat in the crook of his left arm, whilst his right was by his side, one hand on the clawed pommel of his sword.

As he breached the threshold of a large room, passing through a wide metal archway, he was struck by the scent of machine oil and lapping powder. It was dark within, and the shadows cast by the low-burning lume-globes suggested vastness. They danced across the legionary sitting in a seat of iron. Not a throne, it was not grand enough to be considered such, but a place to brood and seethe in embittered silence. This was the Iron Father, and though he took no throne, he was king in this place.

Lost to grim thoughts, the Iron Father only looked up when the Salamanders legionary had stopped a few strides from his seat. A whirring of gears and servos accompanied the gesture, emanating like a growl of displeasure from the black-armoured warrior.

‘What scraps do you bring me this time, Saurian?’

The Salamanders legionary bowed and took a knee.

‘We have found him, Iron Father.’

The Iron Father shifted, lifting his head from where it had been resting against his clenched fist. The dark flashed with a pinprick of blood-red light from his right eye. To Saurian, it looked eager and homicidal. The Iron Father smiled, the scars stitching the flesh half of his face to the metal half pulling so taut they looked as if they might break and tear his imperious visage apart.

‘Have Brother Gallikus rouse Azoth and the other Revenants.’

Saurian was about to reply when he realised the Iron Father wasn't talking to him. A spectre emerged from the shadowy penumbra at the edge of the room, invisible until the moment he had been called upon. The Silent nodded, his avian war-helm dipping like the head of a black crow.

The Iron Father's voice cut through Saurian's thoughts.

'Our quarry won't escape us this time. Horus' lapdog will lead us to our enemy and then burn for what he has done.'

Dismissed, Saurian stood, turned on his heel and walked away. Only when he was sure he was out of earshot and the Iron Father had returned to his machinations did he speak low into his gorget-vox.

'Ahrem, iron-brother, the Raven is on his way.' Saurian didn't wait for an answer – he just kept walking, trying to remember how they had come to this.

He could not.

Ahrem Gallikus closed off the vox and gave a voiceless debt of gratitude to the Salamanders legionary. His breath ghosted in the chill air of the barracks. He and some of the other, *normal*, legionaries aboard the *Obstinate* had taken to calling it the 'mausoleum'. It seemed perversely fitting.

'This is where I leave you, brother,' he said to the hulking figure inside the stasis-casket. Most of his body was obscured by the frost against the glass and the internal cryo-mist, but Gallikus could still see Azoth's face. He had to crane his neck – each casket was set upon a raised dais that provided power – but he could see it well enough. It looked as cold, dead and gelid as when Azoth had been interred into the wretched thing.

'But you're not dead, are you…'

As an Iron Hands legionary, Gallikus knew machines. He knew how to tend and repair them and how to sabotage them, even how to affix a bionic, but he was no Ironwrought or Techmarine – the Iron Father's iron-craft was beyond him. For the moment.

The Raven would be here soon, and his approach would be undetected. Gallikus needed to return to his quarters. For some reason, the Revenants responded to him better than anyone else aboard ship. Gallikus hoped some old memory prompted it, but in his bones he knew it was just a quirk.

As he backed away from Azoth, the half-light from the lumens revealed a host of stasis-caskets.

No, coffins, thought Gallikus, *meant for the dead. Our father's legacy.*

'Only, you don't know you're dead,' he muttered aloud. 'Not yet.'

He sealed the door behind him and made for his quarters to await the Silent.

FIVE

Ave Mechanicum

The Unscarred reached the edge of the outpost on foot, the gunships having landed far enough away so as not to appear on augur or be spotted by a watch station, not that they had seen any other signs of life on this desolated world. The ruins of the city had masked their approach but meant the Salamanders legionaries were spread out, hunkered down behind walls or the shells of half-destroyed buildings. In the darkness, staying out of the lightning flashes of the storm, the Salamanders legionaries could observe the Mechanicum cohorts without fear of detection. It had proved an unnecessary precaution, as the occupants of the outpost appeared oblivious to anything but their labours, the purpose of which remained unclear.

The scale of their endeavours was not.

A red-robed army had descended on this place and were erecting a prefabricated structure of high-sided walls and towers, something more akin to a fortress than a temporary station, the one detected by the gunship's long-range augur. Menials and bulk-servitors toiled to lift wire-threaded power coils and huge cargo crates, whilst tracked automata wheeled in long tracts of piping. Silos and cogitators warred for space as it was slowly colonised by mechanised beings and their trappings. Red-robed overseers ran the operation, consulting data-slates, making computations and analysing data.

Zandu observed everything through the green haze of the scopes, his view lit by occasional bright flashes. Deep night had set in, along with the storm that persisted on the horizon but now was closing in.

'Single point of ingress,' he said, handing the scopes to Obek.

'A gate to a fortress. What are the Mechanicum even doing here? Are there any forge worlds nearby? How did they get here?'

T'kell shook his head. He was watching too, but with his bionic eye he didn't need the augmentation of the magnoculars.

'Is it possible the Mechanicum knew about this place?' asked Obek. 'About the Wrought?'

A dread thought occurred to T'kell in that moment, his jaw abruptly clenching as if to try to deny it. 'Horus may have done. Vulkan confided

much in him during the early days of the Crusade.’

‘And the Mechanicum? What is their role in this?’

‘The Legiones Astartes and the priesthood have fought side by side on many occasions. It’s possible they are still allies of the Warmaster.’

‘Mars and Terra are allies, Forgemaster,’ said Obek, setting down the scopes. ‘After the betrayals… surely the Red Planet would have rescinded their support?’

T’kell’s silence spoke for him.

The three legionaries lay on their fronts, just behind the cusp of a low rise of earth. They had much to question. No one on Nocturne had heard from Mars, or any of their emissaries, for many months.

‘Their presence is unusual, and entirely too coincidental,’ T’kell said at last, considering a less abhorrent question than the previous one. ‘I can draw only one conclusion from it.’

Zandu didn’t need to be a Techmarine to know what that was.

‘They know it’s here and are looking for it.’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant,’ T’kell replied. ‘The Wrought is a weapons cache. Vulkan had several, established during the Great Crusade in case the Legion was ever in need of rapid resupply whilst on campaign.’

Obek grimaced ruefully. ‘The kind of secret he would share with his Warmaster.’

‘The Mechanicum are not here alone,’ said Zandu.

Obek sighed ‘The renegades we burned… But we do not know for sure they are allied together.’ He swore under his breath. ‘Vulkan’s blood.’

‘It might not be of their own volition,’ suggested T’kell, ‘but either way, we must know.’ He started to rise. ‘We need to get closer.’

Zandu turned to look back down the rise to where three squads of Salamanders legionaries were waiting in dispersed formations, weapons primed. A curt battle-sign from the sergeant saw them advance up the hill.

‘How close?’ asked Obek.

‘Close enough that I can infiltrate one of their data-feeds. Fifty feet, give or take.’

SIX

False memories of the massacre

T’kell had gone alone, it being easier for a single legionary in power armour to remain hidden in close proximity to the walls than thirty. Obek kept his eye on the Forgemaster, though, hunkering down inside a crater just large enough to conceal his presence from the sentries on the walls. Mercifully, though the labour crews inside the complex were numerous, the sentries were few, and just lightly armed skitarii.

Zandu had gone back to the squads who had dug in farther up the hill behind the legionaries, so Obek was now alone in protecting the Forgemaster.

Forgefather, he reminded himself as he watched the Techmarine.

T’kell had taken another crater, staying low as he tried to get close to a servitor or augmented menial. The Mechanicum labourers were rad-shielded within hermetically sealed suits, not that it would make any difference to T’kell.

Obek knew little about the Mechanicum or their ways. He had not been inducted into the Martian ranks like T’kell, but knew their machine language was called ‘binaric’ and that T’kell would ‘cant’ an interrogative into the nearest non-biological mind and then siphon off whatever secrets it harboured in its deep programming. He would not even need to touch it.

Obek observed from the crater. No outward sign of the Techmarine’s success or failure presented itself, and the sense of impotence at having to watch and wait sat poorly with the brother-captain, but he would not risk an interruption.

‘I do not like this waiting, brother-captain,’ Zandu said over the vox.

‘A Salamander is patient, brother-sergeant,’ Obek replied, but inwardly empathised. ‘He tempers his mood as he tempers metal.’

‘You sound like Zau’ull.’

The tremor of a smile crept onto Obek’s face.

‘I’ll consider that a compliment. Any unusual movement?’

Obek had instructed Zandu to maintain close overwatch on the outpost. From his higher vantage point, the sergeant had a much better view. Obek

could see little more than the sloping walls and the gap between them through which the workers passed back and forth. Should any sign, however ostensibly innocuous, suggest they had been discovered, they were to engage immediately.

‘The machines still toil,’ Zandu replied. ‘I have sighted several combat-units but only lightly armed and remaining on station.’

That coincided with what Obek had seen too.

‘If needed, we will storm this place and lay waste to any who ally themselves with the renegades.’

‘Understood, Firebearer.’

Obek cut the feed; something was happening below.

‘Forgefather?’ he asked, and could just make out T’kell, whose entire body had gone into spasm, a single violent jolt that put him onto his back.

‘Forgefather?’ Obek asked again when he got no answer. He brought up his bolt pistol, glancing at the outpost but seeing nothing unusual.

A crackle of static infected the vox, a blurt of binaric cant that came from T’kell. He quickly reverted to Gothic, but haltingly. *‘I found… some… ing.’*

‘Are you injured, Forgefather?’

‘Mechanicum… know… they know.’

‘About the Wrought?’ Obek glanced over again, but nothing had changed. He considered voxing Zandu but wanted to know what T’kell had discovered.

‘Us…’ said T’kell, and began to thrash. *‘They know we are here.’*

‘What?’

An explosion lit up the hillside, sending bone scraps flying and chunks of rubble with it. The skitarii had unleashed a heavy cannon.

Obek roared down the vox. ‘Salamanders, engage!’

Zandu was already moving, steadily advancing down the hillside as he led the attack.

‘I’ll secure the Forgemaster,’ said Obek, rushing down towards where T’kell lay eerily still in his crater. He reached him just as the bolters started up and the hillside erupted in muzzle flare.

The shell storm hit the side of the outpost, tearing across its ramparts and howling through its open ingress. There was no gate, just an opening. Servitors and menials alike were shredded, including the combat-unit that had fired the incendiary. Explosive fury ripped through the encampment, and

as the bipedal battle-automata responded, their non-martial equivalents continued to labour without pause.

A phalanx of shield-bearers erected a mobile barricade at the opening, but Zandu quickly put a hole through it with his volkite. A cluster of grenades followed and the makeshift barrier was blown apart and skywards in a series of fiery detonations. The legionaries did not slow, but drove implacably into the outpost itself, targeting sentry points and gun towers with lethal precision.

This was the Legion at war, the Emperor's Angels unleashed, and the Salamanders revelled in it.

The rest disappeared behind smoke, hinted at through half-heard carnage and the throaty retort of Space Marine weaponry, as Obek finally got to T'kell.

'Forgefather?' he asked tentatively. 'Brother?' He was reaching to check T'kell's vital signs when the Techmarine's eye opened. He appeared weak, but lucid.

'What happened?' Obek asked.

'Malicious code,' T'kell replied. 'Something designed to discourage infiltration. As my mechanical implants came under attack, my biological body suffered a seizure.'

Obek offered his arm. 'Can you stand?'

'Unsure.' T'kell managed to look down at his legs, but they stayed inert. 'No. Still non-functional. Need to purge the code.'

'Then do it quickly. The Mechanicum have turned their guns on us,' said Obek, looking over to the outpost and imagining the battle within. Obek knew war, though he had not tasted it since the end of the Crusade. He knew weapons too, so he recognised the timbre of the Phobos-pattern boltguns his warriors used. He discerned their other patterns as well, the almost rhythmic staccato of suppressing and supporting fire. As he listened, absorbing everything in just a few seconds, something incongruous amid the battle din made him frown…

T'kell seized his arm, but only to get his attention. 'Not only the Mechanicum,' he said.

That sound Obek now heard… also bolter fire, but not from his warriors' assault – it *answered* it. A counter-assault. An ambush.

'Sons of Horus,' Obek breathed and raised the pilots, but it was too late.

Breaching the defensive cordon, Zandu pushed forwards. Through the heat of a las-beam fusillade, he quickly appraised the battlefield.

Four watchtowers stood sentry at the cardinal points of the outpost, which was encircled by a defensive wall arranged in a horseshoe with a single open entry point. Crates, pipes, industrial-grade coils of wire and other materials cluttered around a main assembly area where the non-combatants had begun construction of a machine Zandu did not recognise. Some kind of seismic drill, perhaps? There were signs of excavation around the site. Defensive forces were spread out with lighter patrols scattered on the ramparts to the walls but the heaviest concentrations of resistance focused around the watchtowers.

The Salamanders legionaries targeted these first.

Zandu rushed the nearest tower, flanking left with his men. A cohort of mechanised thralls swung a mounted cannon into position, but the angle slowed them down and half of Zandu's squad strafed the gunners from existence.

Another thrall cohort began to close as the second half of the squad hurled krak grenades at the tower's support struts, before reforming again and laying down suppressing fire. A split-second later, a detonation shook the ground and the tower collapsed with all the grace of a felled man. It crashed down onto a group of labour-servitors too slow to move out of the way, or too oblivious to the danger. When the tower then struck a fuel silo, it provoked a firestorm that raged through the encampment, leaving blasted tech-thralls and flesh-stripped menials in its wake. The resulting explosion shook the walls. Some of the menials continued to toil, though their scraps of hair were on fire and their augmetics shone cleanly through the gaps in their melted prosthetic flesh.

Zandu's warriors gunned them down, clearing their sight lines to the robed skitarii in their rad-masks struggling through the fiery wreckage. Returning from the right flank where a second demolished watchtower lay burning, Sergeant Ashax brought up his warriors in support and the two squads formed a phalanx. Against the massed bolter fire, the skitarii had to fall back or face annihilation.

Scattered survivors from the tech-thralls and heavier battle-servitors tried to consolidate and outflank, but Varr's squad laid down a swathe of blazing promethium that cooked them in their metal suits or fused their tracks solid.

The Firedrakes advanced as they burned, hosing ramparts, smothering stragglers and otherwise devastating the Mechanicum's ranks.

Such is the fate of all renegades, thought Zandu as the warrior-spirit within all legionaries rejoiced. It had been too long since he had seen battle, too long as a watchman on Prometheus. It had been an honourable duty, but ultimately all Space Marines yearned for the crucible of battle. This was scarcely war, and it felt different to the way the Legion fought. Thirty men, bolters and flamers, it was far removed from the continent-spanning wars of the Crusade, but he could not deny it felt satisfying. Even though their helms hid their expressions, Zandu knew his brothers felt the same as he.

Ashax even raised his chainsword in triumph as the remnants of the enemy were slowly crushed. Zandu raised his fist too. They had fought together at Antaem and driven back the alien scourge of the orks. A decade older than he, Ashax had taught Zandu what it meant to be a Firedrake and his example had inspired the other sergeant to better serve his primarch and his Legion. As sons of the forge, that bond of brotherhood and shared battle history was all that remained to the Salamanders. Here, a small moment of glory had been gratefully snatched, a rare victory after what felt like many recent defeats. Ashax turned, his triumphant mood infectious, poised to bellow a war cry, jerking instead as the bolt shell struck his gorget and took off his head.

Zandu's body reacted faster than his mind, even as he fought back the horror of seeing the fount of blood erupting from Ashax's neck stump. The others were turning too, but their bolters felt slow to track with him, as if caught by some temporal anchor.

Ashax's corpse collapsed to its knees and fell forwards, but Zandu had confined this grim image to his peripheral vision as he focused on the threat in front of him.

Shadows advanced through the murk, heavy armoured and definitely legionary. A stark zigzagging arc of lightning lit their forms in iridescent violet monochrome. They filled the breach in the horseshoe. Zandu mouthed a warning, motion and recognition happening in nanoseconds of enhanced cognition, as a firing line of bolters opened up.

Any hope of slipping their notice evaporated when Obek saw the three legionaries coming for him and T'kell. The Forgemaster still lay prone, nearly paralysed and vulnerable.

‘You are my only defence, Obek…’ he murmured, and managed to clench his fist though his voice tripped like a badly synched audio feed.

‘Hold fast, brother,’ Obek said, resting a hand on the Techmarine’s chest before drawing his blade. ‘I shall not fail you.’

The three legionaries had slowed, raising their boltguns to their shoulders to fire.

Obek offered them his sword, gently, reverently laying his bolt pistol down but never breaking eye contact with his enemy.

‘You surrender?’ one of them laughed, incredulous.

Obek shook his head. ‘I want to see if the Sons of Horus have any honour left.’

The three legionaries looked at one another and, to Obek’s surprise, lowered their bolters and drew their own blades. They were notched and the metal dark, unlike the captain’s blade, which shimmered like flawless obsidian.

They encircled him, those notched blades reaching out to Obek like claws. Obek moved forwards into the cordon the Sons of Horus had created. It put the fight farther from T’kell and, hopefully, a swift execution from the minds of the renegades who were now focused on the Salamanders legionary who could still walk and fight.

Obek didn’t know why they had accepted his challenge. Boredom, perhaps, or possibly a desire to kill a legionary captain at close quarters. Win or lose, he resolved in that moment before the first blow came that he would not allow them to take him alive. Torture would follow if he did, and Obek would not suffer that indignity. By leaving his bolt pistol at T’kell’s feet, he had left the Forgemaster with a way to avoid such a fate, but could not worry about that now as his assailants closed on him.

‘Any last words, *kinsman*?’ asked one of the renegades as the ring of green and black tightened like a noose.

Obek was about to decline when he gave a different answer. ‘Vulkan lives.’

A thrust came in at his midriff, which he turned aside from to parry a second blow aimed at the join between gorget and helmet. He elbowed the renegade who had thrust, striking a point between forearm and upper arm. The legionary grunted in pain and was turning to stab again when Obek parried the third assailant, breaking his guard to spear his blade into the warrior’s throat. The third legionary gurgled, coughing blood up against his

mouth-grille. The second, the one who had tried to cut Obek's head off, shoved his brother out of the way so he could die somewhere else, and launched a feral attack.

He snarled, spitting incoherent curses with every cleave and thrust. Such was the ferocity of the attack that Obek struggled to defend against it. He also had the other Sons of Horus legionary to worry about. A lance of white heat impaled his side as one of the cuts penetrated his guard, tearing ceramite, adamantium and the mesh beneath until it met flesh. Blood poured from the wound, but clotted fast. It needed to. Obek took a second hit to his left temple, just a glancing blow or the fight would have ended there and then, but it rattled his senses.

Fighting three opponents was hard, but two was harder. A third assailant would often get in the way of the other two, interrupting their natural balance. As one attacks, the other could seek out a weakness in defence and exploit it. If three attack simultaneously, they would become entangled and inhibit their ability to bring superior numbers to bear. So, Obek knew it would get tougher before he was done. He had to move quickly and anticipate the renegades' attacks, which left few chances to counter.

A blow struck his shoulder guard, so hard that it jarred the bone but also snagged the blade. Obek turned sharply, exposing his flank to a vicious thrust from the legionary who was still armed, which sank deep into the meat of his body but wrenched the weapon from the other's grasp. He shoulder-barged the still-armed renegade, forcing him back, affording himself time to marshal his pain whilst the disarmed renegade made the mistake of reaching for the protruding hilt of his sword.

Obek stabbed sideways into his armpit, then pushed the blade down at an angle into the renegade's heart before stepping to the side so the warrior's body was between him and the survivor. The frenzied hack into his brother's clavicle would have cleaved Obek's chest open, armoured or not. Instead, it ended in frustration for the Sons of Horus legionary and left them one against one.

The renegade's blade tore up blood and meat as the last remaining warrior wrenched loose. Another notch had been added to the legacy of betrayals, albeit this last one unintended. Unsheathing his own sword from the dead legionary's armpit, Obek let the corpse fall. He held his side, a gauntlet pressed to the grievous wounds that had opened him up and spattered his blood across the ground.

‘Would you like a rest…?’ he asked, but his voice was strained and ragged with effort.

He expected the renegade to lunge, but instead the warrior dropped his blade and brought up the boltgun that was slung across his back. Dulled by his beating, Obek reacted a fraction too slowly to the altered rules of engagement. He heard the muffled boom of a bolter fired at close range as he reached the last legionary. The shell impact sent spikes of agony across his rib plate and he felt a lung collapse from the kinetic hammer blow against his chest. Mercifully, the shell did not embed or it would have blown out half of his torso. Instead, it caromed off his side and exploded outside of his armour. Heat and shrapnel spoiled his vision, and he tasted blood in his mouth so great in volume he had to spit it out. Half dazed, badly injured, he glared into the retinal lenses of the Sons of Horus legionary, so close now that they almost embraced, and expected the second shell to finish it. Only when he saw the hatred seep away, replaced by a cold vacuous stare, did he realise the renegade was dead. An obsidian blade had scythed through his gut, so deep and impelled with such violence that it had almost cut the warrior in half. An instinctive blow.

Obek had strength enough to wrench his blade free, before he staggered and almost fell.

‘Brother-captain…’ T’kell was rising from the crater at last.

‘Need a moment,’ Obek hissed between clenched teeth, fighting the pain and urging his biology to knit his skin faster.

It took several seconds for Obek’s vision to clear and for the blood rushing inside his skull to recede to a dull roar. He leaned hard on his bloody sword, using it like a crutch, but when he finally arose, he looked to the outpost and the breach in the outer wall now closed by ranks of green and black.

As the Forgemaster limped up beside him, Obek rasped breathlessly, ‘We need to fight.’

Xen craved glory.

His desire for it was the reason he had never been accepted into the primarch’s inner circle of warriors. Numeon had seen it immediately, and remarked as much to Vulkan. To be of the Pyre Guard, of the Seven, required a selflessness Xen did not possess. Pride undid him, but his sword arm? Numeon had told his father he had never seen another in the Legion who equalled it.

Vulkan had given Xen a standard to bear, in the hope the burden of it, both physical and symbolic, would temper his pride. Then the war came and hope died with it.

Xen failed to heed his father's lesson. Consumed by grief, he embraced his natural talents instead. They had served him well. They would need to do so again.

A bolter storm raged across the outpost, so fierce it pushed the Salamanders legionaries behind the wreckage of their assault and made makeshift barricades of the fallen watchtowers. A deadly laager of renegades had formed around them, weapons turned inwards. A diminishing knot of drake-scale war-plate, hunkered shoulder to shoulder, fought desperately at the eye of the storm.

Ashax lay headless, but his warriors had dragged his body into the protective cordon the Salamanders legionaries had erected so it would not be defiled further. Xen only caught glimpses of them through the hail of shells, spitting war oaths as he returned fire into the lightning-streaked darkness.

A second storm had already taken hold, a natural one that threaded the night sky with violet wounds. The fury of the battle was revealed in it, captured by each iridescent flash. A Sons of Horus legionary died in one of those flashes, shot through the neck to be trampled by his brothers still eager for the slaughter. Xen had no time to shout in triumph and no desire. He had looked up to the XVI Legion once, in awe of their prowess and envious of their laurels. Now he despised them.

His bolt pistol spoke for him, its roar joining that of his brothers' and swelling into a blazing bow wave of defiance. The air hazed with the intensity of the fire exchange, but the Salamanders were losing.

'We cannot hold here!' Even across the vox, Xen had to shout.

It took Zandu a few seconds to reply. 'Agreed. We have to break out of this cordon.'

A shell pranged off Xen's shoulder guard as another Salamanders legionary fell, witnessed in his peripheral vision.

Varr's flamers were largely keeping the Mechanicum at bay, but the Sons of Horus were the threat, and they had numbers and an embedded formation.

'Bring Varr up,' said Xen. 'Douse these betrayers with Vulkan's flame and as they're burning, we'll hit them.'

'There'll be nothing to stop the Mechanicum overwhelming our barricade. Our brothers will–'

‘Die? They’re already dying,’ said Xen, but something in Zandu’s voice gave him pause. Not fear, but something akin to it. The Vexillary risked a glance at the sergeant, who had stopped and was inexplicably staring at nothing.

The flames from the promethium explosion had crept into the outpost and flickering orange tendrils had begun to consume the renegades who fought on, nearly inviolate inside their armour.

‘Brother-sergeant!’ Xen snapped down the vox.

But Zandu was already gone, lost in his own darkness.

The burning man stood before Zandu, his armour ablaze, and his eyes pits of infernal flame.

Zandu tried to speak but his throat became so parched that only a rasp escaped his lips. Here was death; here was judgement, a final reckoning. Zandu reached out to him, to the burning man, resigned to meet his fate. Yet as they closed, another hand reached out to seize Zandu’s outstretched gauntlet and a tide of flame engulfed the burning man until he was lost amidst its roaring depths.

‘The fire…’ Zandu breathed, his wide eyes absorbing the terrifying spectacle of his vision.

‘Yes,’ Zeb’du Varr replied, ebullient as he spewed gouts of promethium into the traitors. ‘You see him, don’t you, brother?’

Zandu blinked, as if he had woken from a dream. The flamers had come forwards, just as Xen described, and were unleashing hell into the Sons of Horus ranks.

‘See whom?’ Zandu asked, as his senses returned and he resumed the fight. *Did Varr see the burning man too?*

Varr laughed, and it was a wicked sound, uttered by a devil.

‘See Vulkan!’ he cried aloud. ‘Ablaze and alive in the fires of battle!’

Fire wreathed all. It consumed. It undulated. It *breathed*.

Whenever Varr saw the flame, he knew, *Vulkan is with us.*

The renegades burned. At first they resisted but slowly their forms shrank before the inevitable conflagration, sagging and capitulating as they cooked in their armour. A rank of heavy flamers stood stoic before them with Varr at their head.

Bolt shells hammered off the Salamanders’ war-plate and one Drake staggered, his jet of flame spewing wide and setting fire to the ground.

Another fell, his faceplate cracked apart and a great torrent of promethium rising volcanically like an eruption before he died.

Varr was oblivious. He saw fire and knew it saw him.

‘Vulkan…’ he murmured, and heard the war cry of his primarch in the billow of the flames.

Another voice intruded on his reverie. It was the blademaster, Xen.

An imperative, his duty, cleared Varr’s senses and he ordered his flamers to part like the waves of a lava sea.

‘Pyrus, hit them now!’ Xen bellowed Varr’s war-name. ‘Make way…’

The armoured backs of the heavy flamer bearers moved apart to form a breach, through which Xen led the others.

Only a short distance separated the two forces of legionaries now, the Sons of Horus having advanced as they felt a sure victory was in their grasp. Both his swords drawn, the banner of the Unscarred unfurled from a standard pole fixed to his power pack, Xen closed the gap.

Momentary disbelief robbed the renegades of a few precious seconds, as the insane charge of the Salamanders legionaries rushed out to meet them. The renegades were burning too, and the shock and disorder threw the aim of some. Bolt shells clattered uselessly against drake-scale armour, and the speartip of the Salamanders’ thrust struck.

The clash was intense, and so loud it deafened. Xen split the first renegade from clavicle to groin with a brutal crosswise slash. His falchion had an energised blade; even power armour was no proof against it. He killed two more before his next foe had recovered from the collective battle-shock afflicting the Sons of Horus and could mount some kind of defence.

Two blades of monomolecular steel met each other and began to grind.

His momentum arrested, Xen was forced to stand and actually fight rather than just batter and butcher. Break through the cordon and the Salamanders legionaries lived. Fail to do so and they died. More Sons of Horus were coming and though most had now drawn close-combat weapons, the sheer press of their numbers and skilled aggression would quickly overwhelm the Drakes if they became pinned.

Attrition suited the XVIII Legion, but not against such odds.

Xen turned the warrior’s blade to break the deadlock and used his second sword, a serrated spatha, to hack off the renegade’s hand at the wrist. A sharp thrust to the chest ended it, and he pushed forwards into the maddening swell of bodies.

Zandu was near. Xen could hear him fighting, but saw little except the fountaining of blood and the heady blur of close-quarter combat. It became ugly very fast, and blade skill meant little, as the fight became a scrum of stabbing and bludgeoning.

It made no difference to Xen. He knew every way there was to fight, and to kill. He thrust and cleaved and hacked, leaving some injured, killing others but always pressing deeper, striving to breach the back of the enemy's ranks and seize the chance at survival that success promised.

'Vulkan!' he roared, and heard the fervent antiphony of his kin.

Xen felt the killing heat. It hazed the air and turned it bloody and thick.

'Vulkan!' he roared again, and felt a primal anger rise within. The flamers were with them now, Varr pushing his warriors hard so they didn't remain caught in the trap.

'So many, brother…' uttered Zandu, his voice strained by battle across the vox. At least he was cogent again, it seemed. Xen still couldn't lay eyes on him – too many legionaries in green and black were trying to kill him. He could answer though.

'Ever has our Legion defied the odds… Vulkan!'

An echoing cry rang out, but from fewer voices. Xen's muscles ached and his hearts thundered in his chest, but the momentum of the charge had almost gone and the aperture of hope he had driven towards slid inexorably closed.

'Vulkan!' he raged, not in triumph or defiance, but desperation.

He hoped the dead could hear his plea. He hoped the dead could deliver them.

A gunship swept in low, heavy bolters strafing the renegades' ranks.

It ripped up the rearmost echelons of the Sons of Horus forces, chewing up bodies and sending them spiralling skywards. It moved swiftly, turbines screaming, as a swarm of missiles chased it into the clouds.

The renegades were struggling to counter the sudden aerial assault, hastily turning their heavy weapons on the Thunderhawk that had lined up for another run. They scattered, but the damage to the Sons of Horus ranks was already severe.

Obek rushed into the wake of the gunship's carnage, dispatching the wounded with cold lethality. How quickly fortune could change. T'kell had recovered enough to fight, and did so with a fury at odds with the coldness of his Martian training. Wrath had overtaken them both as they advanced

steadily through the dead and the dying. All too soon they were no longer culling the injured and came upon able-bodied enemies, but when the blow came that felled Obek, he never saw it coming.

Xen knew he would die in this misbegotten hole. An irradiated wasteland was no place for a warrior to meet his end, and he railed at the injustice of it. The knot of renegades grew tighter, a hangman readying the condemned before the inevitable drop. He caught the edge of a chainblade against his pauldron, so hard it jerked his shoulder and his guard slipped…

This is it. Damn you, Zandu. For your weakness, for your–

Muzzle flare suddenly lit up the darkness, spearing through the storm. It scythed into the backs of the renegades, hurling bodies and chewing up the earth. A tremor ran through the enemy warriors, the instinctive reaction of a creature wounded and seeking to retaliate.

The knot had loosened; Xen could see light through it. Cutting down the nearest Sons of Horus legionary, he broke the noose and took his brothers with him. Against such ferocity, the renegades fell back. The gunship returned, as did its twin, and hit the scattered Sons of Horus hard.

Xen kept fighting. He severed the arm of one traitor, then impaled another. He left them grievously wounded, before pressing on. The kill didn’t matter, only survival.

We have been surviving ever since this war began.

Zandu reached him as a small cordon of respite grew around the remnants of the Drakes. His outstretched finger stabbed towards the gunships.

‘Signal the retreat. We’ll make egress via the Thunderhawks.’

Xen bit his tongue, and did as ordered.

Varr anchored the fallback, unleashing a wall of flame to keep the renegades disorganised.

As they reached the gunships, which were already taking fire, Xen saw Zandu had gone back for someone. It was T’kell, unconscious and dragged by his ankle as his rescuer shot indiscriminately behind him. As the Forgemaster was flung aboard, Xen asked, ‘Firebearer?’

Zandu shook his head.

‘Slain?’ Xen could scarcely believe it.

‘I don’t know.’

It was the truth. As they had made their retreat, Zandu had seen T’kell but not Brother-Captain Obek.

Standing in the lee of the Thunderhawk’s open troop hatch, Xen made to go back but Zandu stopped him.

‘He’s gone, brother. We go back, we die.’

‘Then we die. He is our captain.’

Xen looked down at where Zandu’s hand was pressed against his breastplate, then back at the brother-sergeant.

‘He is our captain,’ he said slowly, his voice level.

‘Enough have died already.’

Xen backed down, and Zandu released him.

Varr and his squad had almost reached the gunships. Dwindling spurts of promethium from their flamers signalled their tanks were almost empty. Of the ten legionaries in the squad, only six remained. Two of those grabbed a third, still spitting fire as they dragged their wounded brother into the hold.

Zandu gave the order and the gunships began to rise. As the troop hatch closed, and the shadows closed with it, Xen spoke to the blank, unfeeling wall of the hold.

‘If he lives, we’re going back for him.’

Zandu nodded. His hands were clenched, out of anger and impotence. He tasted blood in his mouth and he thought he might have bitten his tongue during the battle. Then he felt a trickle seep from his nose, marring the faceplate of his helm, and knew he hadn’t.

His retinal lenses crackled with static. They had been doing it throughout the battle, and before. The integrity warning flashed green to red, then stayed on red.

Obek engages the Sons of Horus

SEVEN

The adept

Obek awoke. In the darkness of his confines, he tried to discern as much as he could. The room he was in was small. Certainly, he was underground, for the light was artificial and the air was bad. The walls were bare and nondescript metal. Out of instinct, he reached up for the helm that was no longer there.

‘Don’t concern yourself,’ said a voice from the shadows. The speaker came forwards, also without a helm, and a grizzled face inked with Cthonian tattoos was revealed in the half-light of an overhead lumen-strip. ‘This room is rad-scrubbed. You don’t need your armour.’

His war-plate was etched with scarification, not the ritual kind the Salamanders usually wore on their flesh, but rather the scars earned from battle. Sharp, silver flecks marred already-dirty green-and-black Legion colours. Kill markings proclaimed a legacy of war and death.

‘How many of those were my brothers?’ Obek asked, suddenly aware of the fact that he was bound and seated.

The Sons of Horus legionary regarded the markings that had drawn the Drake’s eye.

‘A fair few.’ His answer showed no malice or sadism; it sounded almost regretful. The blade in the legionary’s hand suggested he wasn’t about to see the error of his ways and surrender, though.

‘How many shot or stabbed in the back?’

He met the Salamander’s gaze, and there was a coldness in his eyes that told Obek this legionary had long since transcended pride or remorse. He could not be goaded.

‘Fewer.’

‘What do you want of me? Why am I here?’

The Son of Horus looked down on his prey.

‘Not to kill you,’ he replied, then regarded the knife. The blade was notched and the metal stained dark. ‘All evidence to the contrary. I’ve been asked *not* to kill you. Not yet, anyway.’

‘Who are you, legionary? Do you know you address a brother-captain?’

‘I am Rayko Solomus, and I do, which is why I won’t dishonour you by asking what you are doing on this world now. Once we begin,’ he said, ‘you will try very hard not to scream, but I want you to know there is no shame in it, not here in the pit. No one of your Legion can hear you. No one of your Legion is coming to save you.’

Obek smiled, despite the pain of his battle injuries.

‘It won’t matter. I won’t talk and you will have changed nothing. The fight will continue without me.’

And then Solomus said something that quelled the fire in Obek’s blood, turning it to ice in his veins.

‘The war is over, brother. Terra has fallen. Horus has already won.’

The cold, mechanical eyes of the adept regarded the prisoner and his warder. It had been several hours since interrogation had begun in the pit and Regulus had shut off the audio inside the small observation chamber. Solomus had been right – the Salamanders legionary *had* tried not to scream. More impressively, though, he had succeeded. Whatever physical pain his torturer could bring to bear, this Rahz Obek had an answer to it.

‘I have always admired the tenacity of the Eighteenth Legion,’ said Regulus, his mechanical voice issuing from the cowl of his black robes. So deep was the hood that it betrayed no sense of his face and his robes were voluminous enough to suggest only the vaguest, humanoid form.

Regulus, though, had transcended human form and humanity itself long ago. If nothing else, the mechadendrite arms that came through a gap in his robes and folded across his back were testament to that.

‘It is a risk to let them live,’ said Vosto Kurnan, his war-plate and Sons of Horus livery battle-worn. He had a sharply trimmed beard and cleanly shorn scalp. The Eye of Horus had been shaved into his left temple and the only gang tattoo he had was one of a writhing serpent over his left eye.

Regulus smiled beneath his hood, his shiny metal digits clicking against the ivory staff he clutched in his right appendage.

‘Great reward comes at great risk, legionary captain.’ He had said that before, to the Fabricator General of Mars himself, to Kelbor Hal. It was as true then as it was now, and the memory of it and what transpired soon after sent a frisson of pleasure through his electrical field. ‘Like the Vaults of Moravec, the Lord Drake’s arsenal will harbour many secrets.’

‘Save your aphorisms. I will only be sanguine once we are into the vault and have plundered it.’

Regulus ceased his tapping, and heard Kurnan unclench his teeth a little.

‘You sound sceptical…’

‘We should hunt them down.’

‘A wounded prey is a dangerous one?’ Regulus scrutinised the Salamanders legionary through the blacked-out armourglass.

‘Precisely.’

‘And how wounded are you, legionary captain?’

Kurnan scowled. ‘What?’ His hand went instinctively to the gladius sheathed at his hip.

‘That is to say,’ Regulus elaborated, ‘how many men did you lose when the Salamanders escaped? Tell me something, is it harder to fight an enemy whose back is not turned to you and whom you only slightly, instead of outrageously, outnumber?’

‘You dare…!’ Kurnan snarled.

‘Chemicals are flooding your bloodstream,’ said Regulus, ‘as your keenly honed biology reacts to your anger. The gladius you wear is four finger-widths out of its sheath, but you will not act.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘Because I have all the power here, and I wanted you to be reminded of this fact.’

The shadows of the observation chamber turned red at the adept’s words and the growl of servos from a mechanised presence sounded behind them.

Kurnan slipped the gladius back, but the anger was slow to subside. Regulus read it in the sudden increase in testosterone in the air. Heartbeat, temperature, surface perspiration, the adept had constructed a complete biological map of Kurnan’s emotional state in nanoseconds. He knew what the legionary was about to do before the legionary did.

‘Watch your tongue, adept,’ Kurnan said, turning to leave the room. He eyed the giant Castellax battle-automata Regulus was using as an enforcer, but the cold steel construct gave no response save the unwavering glare of the red optics in the servo-skull recessed below its dome-shaped head and the nascent threat of its formidable armaments. A factorum marking had been steam-seared into its carapace in Low Gothic. It read: *Kronus VI*.

A sound very much like laughter issued from Regulus’ voice modulator at Kurnan’s threat.

‘It’s a figure of speech,’ he said, putting on his war-helm.

‘Indeed.’

As Kurnan left, Regulus turned his attention back to the Salamanders legionary under the tender mercies of Rayko Solomus.

‘I think you’ve suffered enough,’ he murmured to himself, the Castellax behind him standing cold and impassive. ‘Let’s see what knowledge Solomus has bled out of you.’

Obek knew pain. He knew it like the feel of his sword’s grip or the heft of his bolt pistol. So the pain of a hot blade in his flesh or a fracture in his bones held little concern for him.

Still, he barely registered the stranger admitted into the chamber.

An adept of the Mechanicum, swathed in darker robes and carrying a skull-topped ivory staff. His fingers, if they could be called such, were more like spindly arachnoid limbs than anything remotely human. Even his voice was a facsimile.

‘You can stop now, legionary,’ he said in a calm but mechanised cadence.

Solomus looked up at the interruption, paused, then meticulously began to gather up his several knives. There were flecks of Obek’s blood spattered over his armour, evidence of a task diligently performed, if unsuccessfully.

‘Who are you,’ Obek growled, through bloody lips, ‘the one who promises he can end the pain if I reveal what I know?’ He laughed. It hurt to do so. ‘What I know can’t help you,’ he said, sparing a glance for Solomus, who had stood aside for the dark-robed adept. ‘You had us surrounded, outnumbered and you still failed to kill us. What makes you think you’ll do any better when we know you’re coming?’

The legionary’s face remained impassive, but Obek saw the tremor of irritation in his jaw and silently celebrated this small victory.

‘So, you might as well kill me now.’

The adept drew closer, almost scuttling instead of walking, though Obek could see no obvious sign of locomotion because of the long robes. His face was similarly obscured by a heavy cowl, though something glimmered in the deep shadows beneath it that could have been the adept’s eyes.

‘What did he ask of you?’ he asked simply.

When Obek frowned, creasing the blood on his face, the adept asked again.

‘What questions were put to you? I would like to know.’

Obek grimaced, then gestured to the blank pane which he knew his captors lurked behind. ‘Weren’t you listening?’

‘I prefer to observe without audio.’

Obek sneered, his predicament loosening up his usually stoic demeanour. ‘You cannot find it distasteful?’

‘I neither *find* it one way or another. My preference is based on the most efficient method of gathering data. What remains unsaid or unexpressed can often be more telling than that which is revealed under torture.’

‘Fascinating.’

‘Your sarcasm is noted.’

‘Good.’

A thin mechadendrite blade snapped out from beneath the adept’s robes. ‘To answer your first question, I am Regulus, Martian emissary to the Warmaster, amongst other things. I do have a promise, also, or rather, to be precise, a proposition. But first, answer *my* question – what did he ask of you?’

Obek leaned back in his seat. The bonds around his wrists and ankles were strained, but still held. ‘Nothing.’

‘Indeed. You were right again, legionary. There is no knowledge you possess that can help us. I merely wanted Solomus to hurt you. To see you hurt. I am gathering data on pain, especially that experienced by transhumans. I want you to know that you were invaluable to my research, but that is not the sole purpose of your continued survival.’

‘Should I be relieved?’

More sarcasm. Obek had decided torture had that effect on him. Xen would be proud, if he lived.

The adept didn’t respond. Instead, he turned to Rayko Solomus.

‘Can he walk?’

‘Not immediately. Given time, he will heal.’

Regulus nodded. ‘No matter. Kronus will carry him.’

‘Are we going somewhere?’ Obek asked.

‘I said I had a proposition for you,’ the adept replied, and there was a brief flare of light in the optics Obek now saw under the black hood. He knew nothing about Mechanicum emotional impulses, if they even possessed any, but he swore it felt to him like amusement.

Kronus dragged rather than carried Obek from the cell. His armoured feet dug furrows in the dirt at first and then scraped against metal as the terrain changed. He had been half-conscious throughout, the pain of his injuries finally telling after he’d resisted it to show no weakness before his interrogators.

As he blinked awake again, Obek realised the air had changed. No longer the stale, subterranean odour he had experienced in the cell, but the smell of oil and machinery. He felt a thrum through the metal floor under his feet, heard it buzzing in the walls and knew they were still underground.

Every few metres, he managed a step, trying to gauge the strength in his legs and how fast his enhanced physiology was healing. Too slow to mount any kind of escape. He was alone with the cybernetic and its master, who scuttled out ahead of them, but he was still vastly outmatched. He had seen Castellax battle-automata in action, during the Great Crusade, before the war. This one had been slightly modified from the versions he had seen previously. It had a left-arm power glove with minutely articulated digits, seemingly as dextrous as any human hand. The right arm ended in a circular saw appended to its main reactor core. A twin-barrelled heavy bolter jutted out from a mount on its right shoulder. Against something like that, unarmed, he might as well have taken his sidearm, if he knew where it was, pressed it to his temple and pulled the trigger.

Obek embodied Salamanders pragmatism as much as any legionary of the XVIII, and right now it was telling him to be dragged and see what the maniac in the black robes wanted to show him.

It wasn’t long before he found out what.

The adept issued a blurt of machine noise, and the Castellax came to a halt at the exact same moment as its master.

Despite the ambient noise and the ever-present throb through the metal, it was abjectly dark and Obek felt almost too weak to raise his head anyway. All he could see was metal and the blood trail he had left behind him.

At another binaric command, the Castellax seized Obek around the jaw.

‘Decided to kill me after all,’ he snarled, bunching his muscles as he prepared to die fighting.

‘No,’ uttered Regulus. ‘I ordered Kronus to lift your head. Stop struggling. Look.’

Obek did as asked. Though the darkness made it hard to discern exactly where, he realised they had come to the threshold of somewhere different entirely.

Whirring, clicking mechadendrites broke the silence as Regulus interfaced with a control console in one of the walls. A harsh light filled the chamber soon after as phosphor-globes flared to life with an angry fizz of ignition.

Blinking back the painful after-image seared against his retinas, Obek finally saw what it was the adept had wanted to show him.

A gate, an immense impregnable gate that had to have been fashioned by the hand of a primarch, such was its artistry. *His* primarch. The icon of the Lord of Drakes and his Legion was emblazoned upon it, sunken into the metal. Austere, formidable. Through the fanged maw Obek saw a void, a mechanism, esoteric in design.

‘My proposition is thus,’ said the adept. ‘Open this door and I’ll let the others live.’

It was here. The Mechanicum had found it. They just couldn’t access it.

The Wrought, Obek realised.

EIGHT

Retreat into the dust

Thick smoke was drooling from the engines of the lead gunship. It bled behind it, caught up in the backwash and streaked across the second Thunderhawk in a murky pall.

Zandu tried not to think about how long they might stay aloft. During the evacuation, they had taken damage from the renegades. Every aberrant shriek of the turbines brought a fresh presentiment of a violent and fiery crash landing. He was staring out of one of the side viewing blocks, searching for a place for them to put down before they crashed down.

‘There,’ he voxed the pilot, indicating a raised plateau of land around which the remains of the dead city had eroded.

Squalling red dust announced the gunships’ arrival. In the midst of its reconstruction, whatever atomic calamity had befallen this world had demolished the partial efforts of its native labourers and left behind a skeletal ruin, overgrown with indigenous plant life. Creepers swathed much of the ferrocrete shell and a shallow quarry harboured crates of munitions. Most were either empty or blasted apart. The scorched edges of a hangar-sized bunker delineated a zone of shattered aviation parts, and there were towers, silos and rusted machines. It had been a manufactorum, a large one, devoted to the mass production of materiel.

This world had gone to war with itself, independent of the greater struggle for the galaxy.

Radiation saturated the air, so when the Salamanders legionaries disembarked they did so wearing helmets, protected in their hermetically sealed armour and by its atmosphere filtration systems.

Varr had begun to set up sentries as Zandu and Xen met in the middle of the plateau, just beyond the landing zone. In the background, the Techmarine pilots began the arduous process of repairing the gunships. Both were badly damaged, their armoured flanks breached by shell blasts and studded with shrapnel. Even if they wanted to, the Salamanders could not make atmospheric flight, so they did what they could to disguise the Thunderhawks’ presence with whatever flora was to hand. For now at least,

the *Chalice of Fire* was out of reach. Worse still, T'kell remained unconscious and had been left in the hold of one of the gunships with two of Zandu's squad to watch over him.

Zandu paced to the edge of the rise and stared, as if he would find the answers to their current trials somewhere along the horizon. All he saw were lightning-cast shadows and the silhouette of a dead land beyond restoration.

'We need Krask,' he said, his impatience as obvious as his anger.

Zandu nodded. 'Vox is down. Even if we could reach the *Chalice of Fire*, it will be several hours before they make planetfall. We use the time to regroup and consolidate our forces. If we are reckless then our survival will have been for nothing.'

'And if we stand still, they'll come and kill us in this ruin.'

'Either way, we aren't going anywhere yet. We hunker down, watch the approaches and only engage if necessary.'

The accusation suggested earlier by Xen's tone went unsaid until it couldn't be ignored any longer.

'What happened in the encampment? You were… disabled. I can think of no other word to describe what I witnessed. A mistake that–'

Zandu clenched his fist with a growl of servos, but his frustration was focused inwards. 'I saw it again,' he whispered, as if to speak of it aloud would somehow make the apparition of his dreams manifest. 'The burning man. Ever since Vulkan, ever since…'

Xen drew up alongside him. 'All of us have been touched by his death, brother. But you almost killed us. If we had stayed there–'

'I know what I did.'

'The burning man is… It's not real, Zandu. It is a figment of your mind.'

The sergeant half turned. 'You knew I had seen it?'

'I heard you. During the battle.'

'Merciful Vulkan…'

'Were you a psyker, before Nikaea? I didn't know.'

Zandu shook his head. 'It feels more like a premonition.'

'Of death?'

'Of something I cannot escape.'

'Embrace it! You cannot indulge doubt. Those renegades will be coming for us,' Xen said. 'We must be ready.'

'Perhaps. We hurt them, though. *Varr* hurt them.'

'Your premonition, is it the same as with that pyromaniac?'

Zandu spared a glance towards Varr. He had siphoned the remaining promethium they had left into four canisters and had begun to test the igniters to see which of the flamers possessed the greatest efficacy. His eyes lit up, even behind the sheath of his retinal lenses, as he watched the small blue flame.

‘What do you think *he* sees?’

‘He says it’s Vulkan.’

‘Zau’ull sees Vulkan, he is Igniax. I think Varr is insane.’

‘He is one of us.’

‘I didn’t say we weren’t insane.’

Xen laughed, but levity felt wrong in the circumstances and his humour quickly died in the face of cold necessity.

‘What about the Wrought? It’s likely defensible and as one of the primarch’s caches there will be weapons, ammunition. It is better by degrees than this ruined shell.’

‘It’s not a bad plan,’ Zandu said to the darkness, ‘but how would we find it?’

‘We revive T’kell.’

‘I am not sure how to do that either. He was unconscious the last time I checked. Even if we could, I won’t lead the Sons of Horus or the Mechanicum to the Wrought. That must be why they are here. They would have no reason not to kill Brother-Captain Obek, if he is still alive.’

‘He lives.’

Both turned at the mechanised voice of T’kell.

‘His suit’s biological interface is still running. If it had been removed, it would not be. If he were dead, it would not be. It is running. He is still alive.’

Zandu inclined his head. ‘Forgefather…’

Xen bowed too. ‘Thank Vulkan you are awake.’

‘As much as I would like to account my revival to the will of our departed father, I was attacked by a screed of malicious machine code. I needed time to excise it.’

Zandu clasped the Techmarine’s forearm. ‘Your coming back to us *is* the will of Vulkan, brother,’ but T’kell was slow to grip Zandu’s arm in return.

‘Are you all right?’ Zandu asked.

‘Weary, but I will be fine.’

‘If Obek lives then there is no other choice,’ said Xen. ‘We must attack.’

Zandu let T’kell go but clapped his shoulder guard.

‘Is there something else?’

The Techmarine slowly nodded.

‘The renegades have the Wrought. It is below their camp.’

Zandu frowned. ‘You knew this?’

‘I knew it was near, if not the exact site. As soon as I drew close to the encampment, I could sense it. This burden has been mine to bear since before Isstvan. I hoped it would never come to pass. I hoped Vulkan would return and change his mind. I hoped…’ He breathed deeply, his humanity evidently still a part of him. ‘I hoped for much that has come to nothing.’

‘If it is here, then we take it from them,’ said Xen.

T’kell disengaged himself from Zandu’s grip. ‘We cannot use the Wrought now,’ he replied. ‘Even if we killed every traitor on this world, it is no longer safe. We have to destroy it, or at least destroy whatever is left inside.’

‘Then we have a different mission,’ said Zandu. ‘We extract Captain Obek, kill as many as we can and leave.’

‘Agreed,’ said Xen. ‘But we still need Krask. Hurt or not, the Sons of Horus would rather die than concede defeat.’

‘Vox is still down,’ said Zandu.

‘I will fix it and request reinforcement,’ said T’kell. ‘Both Thunderhawks are also still in need of repair if they are to breach the upper atmosphere. I’ll need time. I suggest you keep a watch, Brother-Sergeant Zandu.’

T’kell left to join the pilots, who had already begun the arduous but essential task of patching and sealing the Thunderhawks’ armour.

As soon as the Techmarine was out of earshot, Zandu spoke across Xen’s personal vox-channel.

‘Did he seem strange to you?’

‘No more than any son of Mars.’

‘He is a son of Vulkan first and foremost.’

‘Whatever his closest allegiance, he is still cold as a nuclear winter.’ As Xen was walking away, Zandu reached out and gripped his arm.

‘Watch him, brother.’

Xen looked at Zandu, then to T’kell and back again. Understanding, he nodded.

Restlessness had ever found its way into Xen’s blood.

He had kept an eye on T’kell as bidden, but when it became apparent no ill was going to befall the Forgefather or his brothers, Xen sought other

distractions. So, whilst the others stood sentry, assisted with repairs or maintained their weapons, he found a quiet place amongst the ruins to practise his blade-work.

He had already cleansed both of his swords and during his vigil sharpened them, so when Xen drew both weapons from the sheath they shimmered like polished drake scale and vibrant flame, the metal stained jade and amber respectively.

‘*Drakos*, *Ignus*.’

He named them aloud, all a part of his ritual.

Xen knew how to wield. He didn’t limit the expression to one weapon, for his proficiency was with *all* weapons. A blade, a spear, an axe… In his hand they felt more natural than a gauntlet, more familiar than the touch of his own face. But *Drakos* and *Ignus*… they were swords almost without equal. Forged by his own hand, the serrated spatha was *Drakos* and the falchion power sword was *Ignus*.

Tempered monomolecular steel, Nocturne-wrought and quenched in the ice floes of the Dragonspire mountains, neither blade had ever failed him. In some ways he felt closer to them than he did his brothers, but then Xen’s heart was solitary by its nature. Even so, a slight pang of guilt fell upon him as he began to slowly circle with the swords. Xen knew Zandu had misgivings about T’kell, but the Forgefather had more Martian blood in him than most cared to concede. His behaviour *was* strange, but Xen had never met a Techmarine who wasn’t.

‘I am no watchdog,’ he murmured, putting more effort into each blade rotation, increasing speed and complexity of motion. It was harder wearing full war-plate. It was the first thing of true consequence he remembered learning upon his apotheosis. To fight in Mark IV battle armour a warrior needed to dispense with certain misconceptions. Ease of movement, for instance. Despite its concomitant back-mounted generator, power armour was heavy and cumbersome but its bulk rewarded strength and raw aggression. Precision, efficiency, lethality – if a blow could be struck, make it a critical one or, better still, a killing one. Leave the exhibitions to the cages, the practice bouts and, if indulged on the field of battle, the dead men.

Xen, in spite of his warrior’s creed, believed that he fought with a finesse and ruthlessness unmatched within his Legion. It genuinely baffled him, then, that he had never been given the honour of becoming a Pyre Guard.

Artellus Numeon himself had seen him fight, and knew of his Crusade victories. No glory serving at Vulkan's right hand for Xen. Instead he had been given a standard, an icon to tether him.

'You show disrespect,' Varr called from a gantry suspended above the barren assembly yard where Xen had come to wield his blades.

As if he can hear my damn thoughts…

'What do you want, legionary?'

'Your scars. They are disrespectful.'

'They are also underneath my armour. What offence could I have caused?'

Varr slammed his fist against his pectoral armour. 'Unscarred,' he said, nodding. He had his gladius already drawn and pointed it at Xen. 'Scarred.'

Xen kept wielding, the blades flashing past one another: green, red, green, red… *Drakos* and *Ignus* in perfect harmony.

'You come and speak with me,' said Varr, slipping into the shadows, 'if you find your shame and realise how you dishonour us. I can baptise your flesh anew.'

Both blades came to an abrupt halt with a shriek of angry metal. Varr had gone, so Xen's caustic invective went unheard.

'These scars are earned,' he said to the darkness. 'Mine by right. *My* honour. Why should I be a pariah?'

But when his indignation faded and the echoes of his declaration died with it, Xen sheathed his swords and went back to his brothers.

NINE

Noble sacrilege

Zau’ull knew he had transgressed. Alone in the deeps of the *Chalice of Fire*, he had besmirched the covenant of guardian and opened the repository’s seal.

The Armarium was so large that he could walk inside, and as he did so, passing through the pressure cloud vented by the door release, he found himself within a chamber unlike any other.

Here was the legacy of Vulkan. His *last*. Though he did not like to admit it, this place felt like a tomb and had an air about it redolent of finality and fatalism. Zau’ull had heard stories. He knew about the death of the Gorgon. When Numeon and his men had returned, having made an impossible journey through the Ruinstorm, they had brought grim tidings with them. The Iron Hands had fractured – some had broken completely – and now sought only death and vengeance. Vulkan’s death had affected all of his sons whether they knew or not, but Zau’ull hoped their father’s absence would not lead to despair.

‘It cannot,’ he whispered to the darkness, and allowed himself a little light. The cold illumination of internal lumens described five caskets fashioned of dark glass and adamantium. An exhibition of his father’s craft, he supposed. Though Vulkan had seen fit to give them each an appellation, Zau’ull did not know their names. He wondered if even T’kell did. Perhaps they would only be given them when it was earned.

But he *felt* something. The hand of the primarch had been upon these weapons of war. Some were small, even innocuous in their cradles and behind glass, whereas others had the shape of war engines.

It wasn’t to bask in his father’s reflected triumphs; that was not the reason for Zau’ull’s sacrilege. He did it in the vain hope that it would restore his broken faith.

‘Are you here, father?’ he asked softly of the shadows, standing in the middle of the false chamber.

Its walls were graven with images of the drake, of the fearsome beasts that dwelled beneath Nocturne and gave the Salamanders one of their

cognomens. Each one glared without pity, without empathy at the fallen Chaplain desperate for some spiritual succour.

You are unworthy, they said.

‘I am Firefather!’ Zau’ull yelled and heard his voice echoed back. It rang hollow. ‘Vulkan… please…’

No answer came, save for the dull throb of the ship resonating through the walls. Even the phosphor-globes appeared to dim as if turning their light from him.

Zau’ull had sunk to his knees without realising, his outstretched hand touching a pane of dark glass mere inches from the artefact within.

Dark times had befallen them, and his brothers needed him, needed his faith and spiritual strength to uplift them.

‘How can I do that, father? How can I minister to them if I cannot minister to myself?’

He bowed his head, grief and anger turning his thoughts into a maelstrom. His hand against the glass became a fist, the metal of his gauntlet scraping against it as his fingers clenched together.

‘Father… answer me,’ he willed. ‘Answer me. Vulkan… heed your son. Heed me!’ he roared, wrenching back his fist to strike, when the crackle of the vox cut through the red fog that had fallen across his sight.

‘*Firefather.*’ It was Krask, hailing him over the vox. ‘*You are needed.*’

It felt like providence.

‘Speak, brother,’ he said, being careful to mask any residual emotion from his outburst.

‘*Word has come from below, from the Forgefather. Renegades, Lord Chaplain, they have taken the Wrought.*’

Feeling strength of purpose returning and a focus upon which to displace his wrath, Zau’ull stood up and raised his chin.

‘Muster your men,’ he said to Krask, ‘and have Shipmaster Reyne ready our drop pods.’ A forge ship it might be, but the *Chalice of Fire* still had some martial trappings. ‘Too long have we laboured under this curse! Too long have we been Unscarred. It’s time we bled again.’

Krask signed off with a rousing confirmation of his orders before Zau’ull severed the link.

‘Too long have I suffered…’ he whispered, reaching for the glass and hoping it was Vulkan’s hand that guided him as he took what was imprisoned behind it.

TEN

The Drakes hunt

The gunship came in low, using the ruined city to mask its approach and taking care to stay out of augur range. Once it had reached the very edge of the point where it could be detected, the Thunderhawk slowed and banked before coming to a halt. It hovered a few feet above the ground, spilling eddies of dust away from the downdraught of the humming turbines keeping it aloft. A side hatch opened, and five figures stepped out, dropping to the ground before disappearing into the ruins.

Then the gunship climbed, the turbines spinning faster until it had cleared any obstacles. The thrusters kicked in and it joined the second Thunderhawk as they sped for the encampment not far off on the horizon.

'How long until Krask and his Terminators make planetfall?' Zandu asked, shouting into the vox as he vied against the engine noise whipping through the hold.

'*Via drop pod insertion, it will be fast*,' T'kell replied, his voice a crackling machine-like echo in Zandu's ear. '*Their landing is timed to coincide with our assault.*'

'We are less than twenty minutes out.'

'*Then you have your answer.*'

Zandu nodded then switched channels.

'Xen.'

'*We are close*,' the legionary replied. '*Make sure you ram it down their throats.*'

'You have eighteen minutes.'

'*Understood.*'

The link went dead and Zandu sagged, a little grateful for the guide rail as he held on. He was out of his harness, standing with boots mag-locked to the deck. They all were. The rad-counter of his retinal lens display had reached several thousand rads. Enough to kill a mortal man within hours.

Vulkan had no Destroyers amongst his ranks; he had forbidden them because of the sheer ruination such warriors caused, but, during the Crusade, Zandu had seen them. Radiation weapons were only one of the means used

to end the enemies of the Imperium. Back then it had almost felt necessary, but now it was horrific. He remembered an Iron Warrior who had just returned from the front, having unleashed phosphex and intense radiation bombing as part of his unit. The legionary looked grim enough in his war-torn armour, streaked in dirt and blackened by fire. The Salamanders were a relieving force, intended to lift the burden of the war for a while so the Iron Warriors could refit and resupply for battles elsewhere. Their association had been fleeting, but it stuck with Zandu because of what he saw when the Iron Warrior removed his helm.

It had been hot in the warzone, and the last stretch of it was a dense tranche of jungle, hence the Salamanders and their Pyroclasts. Zandu knew back then it had to have been stifling in that legionary's armour. So, when they were returning from the front and realised that relief had arrived, the Iron Warrior took off his helm in spite of the biting flies and the heat that trembled in the air that stank of sweat and blood. He drank it in, through a mouth with six teeth. The others had fallen out, like much of his hair. His eyes were sunken, his flesh too, and it carried an almost waxy sheen that glowed faintly in certain light.

He had smiled when he had noticed Zandu looking at him, an ugly gesture yet still worthy of pity.

'Welcome to the war,' he had said in the death rattle of a condemned man.

Bone, flesh, hair, every cell of this legionary had been irradiated and it was to be his doom. A Space Marine was hardy but he was not invincible. Most would die anyway, in battle, but this one was not so far from duty's end and he was returning victorious. He had smiled again to Zandu when no reply was forthcoming from the Salamanders legionary, ironically perhaps, but the image of his grim and skeletal visage had been forever seared onto his memory. He recalled it again now, as he tasted the blood in his mouth and smelt it in his nostrils. Wet metal, like old copper, filling his every sense and dispelling the myth of immortality.

Apothecary Fai'sho from Zandu's squad looked over at him, questioning even through his retinal lenses.

'Brother-sergeant?'

Zandu made an effort to stand straight and appear strong.

'I am fine. Hold to your purpose, brother. War will be upon us all soon.'

Fai'sho nodded and looked away, but Zandu kept his eyes on the rad counter and his armour's insistent integrity warnings.

Red. Red. Red.

Xen stalked through the ruins of the dead city. He passed through domiciles and commercia districts, through narrow streets and wide plazas. The people were all dead, but the corpse of their city lingered, reluctant to expire except perhaps towards entropy.

Four others followed in his wake, moving fast and keeping low in their bulky war-plate. The Mark IV variant was hardly made for stealth – that was the province of the lighter protection worn by reconnaissance Vigilators – but Xen moved with a grace that belied the weight and heft of his armour. His brothers emulated him, matching his movements expertly.

The south facing of the encampment was damaged. Unless the Mechanicum had already effected repairs, the section of wall opposite the entry gate would be festooned with wreckage and structurally unstable defences. The exploding promethium tanks cooked off by Varr had seen to it, at the time both a distraction and a punitive move to reduce the enemy's combat efficacy. Now, it yielded further benefit… *if* Xen and his squad could move unseen and breach the wall's cordon undetected.

Zandu would have to play his part, and Krask.

He paused and looked skywards. The storm continued to boil, and the night was shot through with iridescent purple and red. Soon it would burn with the contrails of drop pods and then the Wrought would be theirs.

Emerging through the dense ruins of a collapsed habitation block, Xen sighted the encampment. It loomed above most of the dilapidated structures left standing in the city, the slab of dark grey metal walls declaring its dominion. A crack zigzagged from its base to its apex. Shrapnel from the explosion choked the battlements under a swathe of debris and no watchtower overlooked it.

Xen battle-signed for a halt, and then opened up the vox.

'Two hundred feet out.'

'*Confirmed.*'

'Advancing to final position.'

'*Await signal.*'

Xen cut the link.

Three legionaries in drake-green war-plate silently awaited his next command, but Xen's attention lingered on a fourth armoured in red.

'Are you prepared for this, Forgefather?'

‘I have been prepared since the moment I donned this mantle,’ T’kell replied, clutching a fistful of the drake hide cloaking his shoulders and brandishing it at Xen.

‘I only meant as a Techmarine, you might not–’

‘Are you prepared, Vexillary?’

Xen nodded. ‘I suppose all of us are having to adapt now.’

‘Zandu asked you to watch me, didn’t he?’

Xen glanced at his comrades, who tried not to react. Then he nodded for a second time in as many minutes.

‘You do not need to,’ said T’kell. ‘Watch them.’ He gestured to the walls and the renegades the Salamanders legionaries knew awaited them within.

They moved out.

ELEVEN

Wolves no longer

Rayko Solomus had left the pit and was sitting on an ammo crate looking out from the battlements on the north wall. He saw the city ruins and the decaying horizon, and found himself unmoved. As he only half heard the menials toiling somewhere below and behind him, Solomus wondered how long he had been this way. Dead inside, bereft of feeling. Only when he held the torturer's knife did a mote of true emotion return, and even that had been denied to him. The Mechanicum emissary had the Drake now.

'He did not scream?' asked Nevok, stopping to regard Solomus as he loaded a fresh shell into his weapon's clip. 'They certainly can take pain.'

Nevok stood sentry, waiting for the Salamanders to come. Sons of Horus stood at arms now, bolters at the ready, a squad of heavy weapons with their sights trained on the skies. Their subterfuge no longer any use to them, they would fight the Salamanders in open battle. They *were* bloodied, though. A row of dead lay in a makeshift apothecarion, waiting for Renk to remove their progenoids. Even the survivors had burns and scorched armour.

'They are born unto it,' said Solomus, 'unto fire and death.'

Nevok nodded as he slipped in another bolt shell. 'Have you seen their bodies? His scars had scars.'

Solomus drew his knife, admiring the sharpness of the blade. 'He killed Hajuk, Morvek and Ezremas,' he said, counting the legionaries off one at a time on his gauntleted fingers. 'At the *same* time. He fought them, three against one.'

Nevok laughed as he slammed the clip back into his boltgun. 'I seriously doubt that. The Drake was a fighter – anyone who is Legion could see that – but all three…' He shook his head and scoffed, 'Ezremas alone would have gutted him. These Drakes are warm-blooded, but they are not like us. They are weak.'

'He did it,' said a voice from behind them. Vosto Kurnan made his way up to the battlements via a metal stair that creaked under his armoured weight. 'I saw him,' he added matter-of-factly, coming to stand beside the other two legionaries.

‘Then why did you not intervene?’

‘They had done themselves enough dishonour without my defeat of the Drake making it worse,’ he said. ‘Besides, I hated Hajuk, Morvek and Ezremas.’

‘You hate everyone, brother.’

‘True,’ Kurnan said lightly, and looked askance at Nevok, ‘but I reserve an especial hatred for some. And they aren’t weak,’ he added. ‘You never served at Isstvan Five, you never saw them *fight*.’

Nevok looked at them both, nonplussed. ‘What? That was butchery, not service.’

Kurnan drew close. Nevok had his bolter by his side and fully loaded.

‘We *had* them, brother. The Ravens were abroad, guerrilla fighting even then. The Gorgon and his warriors… well, they were hell-bent on Fulgrim. But we had the Drakes, surrounded, outnumbered, at the mercy of the high ground and our entrenched artillery. You should have seen the Iron Warriors pummel them…’ He shook his head as if remembering the events he was describing in vivid detail. ‘Any other foe would have died and died fast, and they did,’ he said, and his voice grew low and more menacing, ‘but those Drakes refused to yield. They fought even as the bombs rained and their brethren fell in droves. Even when the Gorgon died and the Lord of Drakes fell soon after, and when the Raven fled… they kept on. And on. Some had lost limbs, others were impaled or blind, wounded beyond any reasonable capacity to function, even for legionaries.’

Kurnan backed off, but his eyes still burned into Nevok’s through his retinal lenses.

‘I have heard it said that when you kill one of Guilliman’s sons, you make sure he is dead. Vulkan’s sons… well, they just don’t die at all.’

‘Have no fear, Vosto,’ uttered Solomus, rising from the ammo crate, ‘I will kill any that you can’t.’

Kurnan glared.

‘I respect them, Solomus, as you would do well to.’

‘While you are affording them the necessary respect, I shall be gutting them, brother.’ Solomus held up his knife. ‘With this.’

Kurnan scoffed, unimpressed. ‘I hope you fight better than you interrogate,’ he said.

‘Ah, well,’ Solomus replied and the smile between clenched teeth could be heard in his tone, ‘as you say, they are resilient.’

‘Yes, and they are coming. Here. Soon.’ Kurnan looked to the distant horizon, as if expecting to see them there.

‘Regulus is counting on it,’ said Nevok.

‘He needs them inside,’ Kurnan told him.

‘I cannot promise to be genial as I leave open the door, brother,’ said Solomus.

Kurnan faced him again. ‘You can rest assured they won’t hold back with us. They hate us.’

‘Betrayal has its cost, I suppose.’

‘Indeed.’

‘We should have hunted them down,’ said Solomus to Kurnan as he began to walk away.

‘Yes, we should, and now we’ll reap the profits of that arrogance.’

Kurnan descended from the rampart, leaving his brothers to their duty.

‘I expect it to be a bitter harvest,’ said Solomus.

He laughed, humming to himself as he toured the rest of the battlements.

TWELVE

As we have burned

Xen heard rather than saw Zandu's signal. A gunship on a strafing run screamed out of the darkness and blew a section of wall apart with the last of its missile payload. The explosion turned the night fiery red as the contrails of rockets chased it away.

A second detonation erupted moments after the first, smaller and concealed in the slow-receding wake of the missile attack. Three krak grenades affixed to the south wall went off simultaneously and tore a fissure in the defences wide enough for a legionary to pass through.

Xen went first, climbing over the v-shaped breach and into the encampment. Smoke and the wreckage accrued from the first battle provided thick cover and the squad was able to advance unseen. After they had progressed only a few feet beyond the threshold, Xen ordered a halt.

'Why do we linger, brother?' asked Phokan, a legionary from Zandu's depleted squad.

Ahead, at the entrance to the horseshoe-walled encampment, Zandu and the others fought ferociously. Bolters sang a deadly chorus, but the power armour worn by the Legions was made to be hardy and bore the brunt of fire from either side.

A brutal, attritional stalemate was unfolding. Xen knew it would not last.

'No sense in running off,' Xen told the legionary, but then looked at T'kell. 'This is why you are here, Forgefather. Where is Obek?'

'His armour signature is coming from below us. We have to find a shaft or passage that leads down, something dug by their machines.'

'There!' A legionary named Gairon, who fought with a curved sarissa attached to his vambrace, gestured to where a squad of skitarii were standing guard. 'Under attack and they hold their position,' he said. 'They must be protecting something.'

Xen clapped his shoulder. 'Not enough protection. Not from us.'

By now the renegades had been fully engaged, focused on the threat at their gate that they saw rather than the one they didn't in their midst.

Xen and the squad stalked through the debris, using the darkness and the distraction of the storm raging above. As they moved, they went fast but took care to stay out of the reflective glow of explosions or the frenzied muzzle flare of bolters.

Eventually, they reached the guard squad. Xen killed them quickly, dispatching all five of the skitarii before they could raise an interrogative.

‘It’s red work,’ muttered Gairon in appreciation of the Vigilator’s skill.

‘Not really,’ Xen replied, showing him the oil-black stain on *Drakos*. *Ignus* was much the same, and he wiped them on a dead skitarii’s robes.

‘Here,’ said Phokan, standing by the edge of a large hexagonal shaft and using his bolter to gesture down. It was an access chute to the subterranean part of the installation, easily wide enough to accommodate someone wearing power armour. An armoured lip delineated it, designed to fold down and form a slope, but the Salamanders legionaries could cross it easily enough. The shaft itself had rungs wrought into two of the facing walls, which allowed a steady if slow descent.

Raios stood sentry as the others began to make entry. He was not long a Firedrake and as Xen studied the legionary, he wondered if it had been out of necessity more than worthiness that Nomus Rhy’tan had advanced him to such an august rank.

‘If they come, I will kill them here,’ Raios promised Xen, reading the Vexillary’s body language.

Xen nodded to Raios, and considered that their Lord Chaplain on Nocturne knew his business after all.

‘Hold as long as you can,’ Xen told him, ‘but do not throw your life away needlessly. You have photon flares?’

‘I do, brother.’

‘Drop one in the shaft if you are forced to retreat.’

‘What if the *vengu* dies?’ asked Gairon, using an old Themian word for ‘hatchling’ or ‘youth’.

‘Then I shall drop two,’ answered Raios, ‘so you know the threat is dire.’

Gairon laughed, but Raios kept lookout.

Well chosen, indeed, thought Xen.

‘You first, brother,’ Xen told Gairon, who nodded before he climbed into the shaft.

‘You next, Forgefather,’ Xen said to T’kell.

He nodded, climbing in after Gairon.

Xen went next, honouring his promise to Zandu, and Phokan brought up the rear.

‘Must be over five hundred feet,’ uttered Gairon, farthest down, his voice echoing up to the others as they followed.

‘Four hundred and eighty-seven, brother,’ T’kell informed him.

‘Bio-scanner?’ asked Xen, keeping the pace steady.

Below, T’kell shook his head. ‘Nothing.’

‘And your other augurs?’

Again, the Techmarine shook his head. ‘Negative.’

‘Then let us hope our good fortune lasts a while longer,’ said Xen as the bottom of the shaft grew closer with every rung.

Zandu crashed down behind an arching wall buttress and waited a few seconds for the fusillade hammering it to ebb.

Fai’sho was right behind him, and fired off a snap-shot with his bolter before hunkering down too.

‘I’d say we are holding their attention, brother-sergeant.’

Zandu nodded curtly. ‘Then let’s keep it that way. Xen needs as much time as we can give him.’ He fired back, the burst of muzzle flame shining in the chips of bare metal across his armour.

Fewer than thirty legionaries remained of the forty who had made planetfall, and they congregated around the entrance to the encampment. Varr held the right flank, having scoured the upper rampart of enemies. Zandu had the left, with the remnants of Obek’s squad providing reinforcement to either side. Inroads were slow, foot by bloody foot, but the Salamanders legionaries weren’t trying to storm the castle; they just needed to hold long enough for Krask to make planetfall from the *Chalice of Fire*. So far, they had succeeded in pushing the Sons of Horus into a grim stalemate, as both sides exchanged fire from behind cover.

‘Are you ready, brothers?’ Zandu asked down the vox, and was greeted by a string of affirmatives. ‘Then give these traitors death!’

As one, the Salamanders legionaries broke cover to unleash a combined salvo that forced the renegades back through sheer fury.

‘Advance! Now! Go!’ Zandu roared, charging across the threshold and behind a second tranche of heavy cover.

Foot by bloody foot…

Hunkering down again at the inevitable return fire, Zandu arched his neck to look up, hoping to see the drop pods, hoping to see the sky burn…

The *Chalice of Fire* was burning. Another vessel in orbit around the planet had attacked them. Long range, a lance volley. The barrage exploded amidships, directly hitting the launch bays. A calculated blow from an unknown aggressor that had struck the *Chalice of Fire* unseen, undetected and unprovoked. Emergency crews hurried throughout the deck trying to douse the flames roaring across the launch bays and haul away the bodies where they could.

Krask and his Terminators were watching, unable to make their assault from orbit as planned.

They had already cleared away as much of the wreckage caused by the explosion as they were able, their armour now scorched by more than ritual fire. Thanks to their efforts, men and women who might have otherwise lost their lives were still breathing.

The apothecarion, however, had quickly reached capacity.

Krask turned off the vox, having just been in conference with Shipmaster Reyne.

‘It wasn’t Sons of Horus,’ he said aloud to his brothers, his gaze still on the devastation.

‘Then who?’ asked Zau’ull. The Chaplain looked up at Krask from a kneeling position where he granted peace to one of the injured deck crew caught in the blast. ‘Mechanicum?’

‘Reyne doesn’t know, only that the ship does not match any renegade vessel we have in our archives.’

‘But we *were* attacked?’

Krask nodded slowly, his fist clenching in its power glove.

‘This is a mess.’

Zau’ull cast his eyes across the dead. Most were servitors, at least. ‘Mercifully, you had not embarked, or the death count would be much higher and you, Wyvern, might well have been amongst them. Be thankful to Vulkan for that.’

Krask murmured a ‘Vulkan lives’, briefly bowing his head and shutting his eyes before focusing back on the disaster.

‘However long it will take to make it right,’ he said to Legionary Rath, who was returning from speaking with the Techmarines, ‘this delay has already cost us dear. Well?’

‘They are almost ready, brother-sergeant. Two launch bays have been cleared. They await only your command.’

‘I give it,’ snarled Krask, seemingly heavier and deadlier in his war-plate as he stamped over to where deck crew were prepping the launch bay. The dead and injured had been removed, along with the wreckage, so the drop pod could be embarked, but the bloodstains remained.

Krask could not help but look at them as he entered the teardrop-shaped vessel that would convey him and his brothers to the surface. A second drop pod was being readied alongside for Zau’ull and a retinue of Terminators.

‘Whoever is responsible,’ he promised to Zau’ull, one foot inside the drop pod but yet to enter his harness, ‘they will burn for this, as we have burned.’

‘Vulkan’s retribution will find them, Krask,’ the Chaplain replied. A case, large enough to hold a sword, was mag-locked to his belt. His gauntleted fingers brushed against the metal as he stood at the threshold of the drop pod. They trembled slightly but Krask did not notice. ‘It will find them,’ Zau’ull told the shadows, but did not see Vulkan waiting for him.

Instead, he heard the alert siren scream loudly and saw the blistering fire of the second lance blast as the deck was blown half apart.

THIRTEEN

Our former glory

Vosto Kurnan heard the battle raging above. It sat poorly with him to lurk here like assassins in the shadows, waiting, but then he supposed that is what they were.

It is what we have been reduced to.

The underground complex had been carved out by the Mechanicum using their menials and machines. It had alcoves and chambers; the corridors had deck plating underfoot. Every effort had been made to map the extent of Vulkan's armoury, to find any entry point and probe for any possible weakness in its outer shell. Judging by what Regulus had revealed to him, it was large enough to harbour a battle-barge.

The adept had found the Drake Lord's old sunken cache quickly. Seismic stakes of Regulus' own design were launched from orbit and had been driven deep into the planet's crust. Using the resulting geological mapping made possible by the stakes, Regulus had detected an immense structure deep below the surface.

Entry had proven more difficult.

Acoustics in the subterranean levels cored out by the adept's machines and menials were good – Kurnan and his warriors could hear every war cry, every dying scream.

'I believe that was Nevok,' whispered Rayko Solomus casually. His head was cocked to one side as if trying to discern the cadence of specific legionaries as they died or fought.

'Those are your brothers,' spat Kurnan with no shortage of bile.

'I have no doubt they'll fight like the dirty Cthonian scum they truly are.'

A few of the others looked around at that, the growls of their power armour acting as a metaphor for their thoughts.

Solomus held up his hands. 'I meant it honourably,' he said. 'Besides, aren't we waiting here in the dark to stab some of our warrior-cousins in the back?' He shrugged, as much as was possible wearing war-plate. 'That feels… *quite* underhand.'

‘What we do, we do for the Warmaster,’ snapped Krede. The legionary’s gauntlet creaked metallically as he tightened a fist around the haft of his sheathed chainblade. The other arm ended at the elbow in a stump of fused bone and cauterised flesh, a fact that made him no less deadly.

Again, Solomus feigned contrition. ‘Hail Horus,’ he said.

‘You had best hold your tongue now, legionary,’ Kurnan muttered to him under his breath, so only Solomus could hear, ‘else you’ll be the one that finds a knife in his back.’

Solomus nodded. ‘I’ll keep that in mind.’

‘What is wrong with you, brother?’ Kurnan asked, keeping his voice low. ‘Do you hate your Legion? Or should you have died on Isstvan Three with the other traitors?’

‘I hear they call us that. It’s a matter of perspective, I suppose.’

‘I need an answer, Solomus,’ said Kurnan. He had drawn his blade without the other legionary noticing, but showed its edge to him now.

Solomus gave a mirthless laugh, more like a choke of breath. ‘No need to ruddy your blade, and I killed my share of dissenters on Isstvan Three.’ Kurnan could hear the amusement in his voice. ‘More than my share. Our father has no more dutiful a son than I, and the Legion no more willing a soldier, but this, serving these cold-hearted, bloodless machines… It makes me want to kill *everyone*.’

Kurnan could not disagree with that. He sheathed his knife.

There were five legionaries in the chamber, all that Kurnan could spare from the forces he had left above. His was a second force, a flanking force that would ensnare the Salamanders and push them into doing something desperate. Kurnan had argued with the Mechanicum emissary about the plan, that digging out an entrenched cohort of Vulkan’s sons would be both lengthy and costly, but Regulus had seemed unconcerned.

‘You’ll get your chance,’ said Kurnan, returning to the matter at hand. ‘We all will.’

Solomus nodded.

‘Even them?’

Behind them, waiting in the dark, arrayed in dormant ranks were scores of battle-servitors. Eyes as dull as stone glared coldly into the shadows, but at a command from the adept would rouse into violent animation. It was, Kurnan thought, an unsubtle reminder of Regulus’ power.

‘I doubt they would even feel it.’

‘Are we lackeys now, brother?’ asked Solomus.

Kurnan scowled, but did not answer.

Obek was on his knees, the hulking presence of Kronus looming behind him.

Despite the pain, the Salamanders legionary managed to lift his chin to look at the adept.

‘How do you even know I can open it?’

‘I do not,’ Regulus replied, scrutinising Obek through the optic implants hidden in the shadows of his cowl. ‘I have a hypothesis, but I need your compliance to test it.’

Obek bared his bloody teeth in a half smile, half snarl. ‘You aren’t considering all the variables, master adept…’

The chittering refrain of Regulus’ steps echoed in the cavern as he came forwards, within reach of the Salamanders legionary. Obek whispered.

‘I would rather die than help you.’

Obek sprang up from his kneeling position to seize the adept around where his throat should be. He grabbed something corded and unyielding, cold like metal but throbbing in some horrific parody of life. The hood fell back and the illusion of humanity shattered.

The optics that served as the adept’s eyes flared once, brightly, painfully. Two arachnoid limbs darted from behind his back, through slips in his robes and speared Obek through the left and right pectoral muscles.

Obek cried out in sudden agony, staring at where two blades had pierced his armour.

‘Now you see,’ said Regulus, his voice even more human in that terrifying moment of revelation. He forced Obek back down to his knees and broke the hold the Salamanders legionary had on his ‘throat’.

‘I do not appreciate being touched,’ the adept said. ‘I find it human and distasteful. I theorised your humanity and pragmatism might provoke a desirable reaction, that you would choose to sacrifice yourself to ensure the survival of your brothers.’ He retracted the blades, releasing two twin spurts of blood from Obek’s body. Two further limbs then returned the cowl as Regulus retreated beyond the Salamanders legionary’s reach.

‘I conclude that I have made an error.’

‘It won’t be your last,’ said Obek, growling against the pain.

‘Experimentation is trial and error. I have erred with you, legionary.’ He looked up and his eyes flared again, this time issuing a command instead of countermanding a pre-programmed one.

‘Wha–’ Obek began before Kronus seized his neck in one mechanised fist and turned him. The buzzsaw blade affixed to the Castellax’s other arm glowed hot and began to turn. Then it slashed down and took off Obek’s arm at the elbow.

He screamed, loud enough to echo down the corridor, and clutched the stump of his right arm. Sheer, agonising heat cauterised the wound in the instant of severance. Obek clamped his teeth shut so hard he thought they might crack.

‘Solomus failed, but I suspected I could make you scream,’ the adept said.

‘I’ll kill you for this,’ Obek growled through the pain.

‘Statistically, that is unlikely given your current predicament.’ He looked down at Obek’s severed arm. Kronos still held on to the Salamander, so Regulus retrieved the limb himself. Then he carried it over to the door where the sigil of the Lord of Drakes glared coldly. ‘I believe this mechanism is of Mechanicum manufacture. I assume it was gifted to your dead primarch as part of the accord and unity that has long existed between Mars and Nocturne. Do you know how it works?’

Obek slowly shook his head, his teeth still gritted in agony, and his face beaded with sweat.

‘It is sealed with Vulkan’s own genetic markers. Literally, his blood is keeping me out.’

Obek gave an angry nod. ‘Even in death he defies traitors and renegades.’

‘Does that give you comfort, Salamander?’

‘You know it does.’

‘Curious… But this is not pertinent to why we are here. Vulkan lives in you, legionary.’

‘What?’ Obek frowned, as the word nearly caught in his mouth.

‘Not in some spiritual sense that would act as some temporary and self-deluding salve to your obvious grief. I mean *actually* in you. Your blood, your genetic heritage. It holds the key.’

He regarded the limb once more.

‘Alive or dead, we shall have our answer.’

Then he thrust the arm into the gaping mouth of the sigil.

Nothing happened. No sound of gear moving emanated from within, and there was no trembling of the earth as the Wrought finally gave up its secret. There was only silence, followed by a frustrated blurt of binaric from Regulus.

Obek laughed. He laughed so loudly and so hard that he felt fresh pain from his wounds.

‘You erred again,’ he said.

Regulus turned swiftly, his optics picking out the arm that was still attached to his prisoner.

‘An experiment. I could have forced your arm into the lock, but I wanted to see if I needed to. Trial and error,’ the adept reminded him, and looked up to his hulking mechanised companion. ‘Kronus–’

The Castellax had barely engaged its rudimentary cognitive processor when a shell struck its shoulder and tore the arm free in a welter of sparks. Fluid spurted from the thrashing hydraulic cables that had connected torso to limb, but the construct was already turning and priming weapons as the second shell struck its centre mass and exploded.

This blow was less effective. The impact dispersed across its heavily armoured shell as smoke plumed around its body, barely impeding the Castellax as it put itself between harm’s way and its master.

Obek tried to rise, but stumbled and could only look back.

Figures in power armour advanced towards him through the shadows. Three bolters flared as one but Obek’s vision had blurred and he couldn’t see his rescuers clearly. He knew they were Salamanders though.

He barely had time to shout, ‘Vulkan lives!’ before Kronus’ shoulder-mounted cannon started up with a roar.

Light, heat and noise filled the crowded corridor and one of the charging Salamanders legionaries went down hard. He struck the wall as the shells detonated, bounced off metal siding and kept running a few more feet before the heavy bolter put a hole in his torso.

The others kept coming, shooting and advancing.

A stray round struck Regulus, who emitted a panicked blurt of cant that made Kronus half turn. A plasma bolt screamed out of the chaos and destroyed the Castellax’s cannon, as a second bored a hole through its reactor. The air filled with an actinic stench and the ear-shredding whine of a reactor overload before a plosive detonation rocked the corridor. Dust and grit streamed from the ceiling as Kronus VI exploded loudly and violently. Thrown onto his back, agony surged anew through Obek’s already tortured body.

Regulus had fared much worse. He staggered, using his servo limbs to try to steady himself. A piece of shrapnel jutting from his body was impairing

the adept's motor function. An amalgam of blood and machine oil was dripping from somewhere beneath his robes.

The other Salamanders legionaries had been thrown too and were getting up at the same time Obek was dragging himself to his feet. He eyed the adept keenly, nodding to him as he reached down for a length of armoured piping spat from somewhere amidst Kronus' inner workings.

It wasn't a bolter or a chainblade, but it would do.

'Didn't I say it would not be your last error…'

Regulus gave a blurt of binaric as whatever passed for his lifeblood pooled on the ground around him.

Obek grimaced, and tried not to enjoy his retribution too much.

'There's not enough left of that thing to save you any more.'

'Not…' said the adept, his voice modulation fluctuating wildly, '…for… Kronus…'

A third plasma bolt vaporised him before he could say anything else, and Obek turned around to see who had denied him vengeance.

His annoyance immediately abated when he recognised who it was.

'Forgefather?'

'I live, Firebearer,' T'kell said, and gestured to Obek's arm, 'but you look barely alive yourself.'

'Half,' Obek said, and looked down at his severed arm. Regulus had dropped it when he had been impaled. 'He said the door was sealed and only the primarch's genetic markers could unlock it.'

Xen's arrival prevented any further discussion. He was bloodied and had come from farther down the corridor.

'A second force is pushing this way,' he told them, then remembered to salute his captain.

Obek looked down the corridor but could see only darkness. He did hear the distant sound of combat, though, and said, 'Speak, Xen.'

'Battle-servitors, with renegades leading them. I heard it from Zandu.'

'Where is he?' asked T'kell. 'And what of Krask and our egress?'

Xen shook his head, just as the vox crackled to life.

'*This is Sergeant Zandu, respond.*'

'You are speaking to Obek, brother-sergeant. What is your position? Where is Krask?'

'*Captain, praise Vulkan you are alive!*' said Zandu, but his joy was short-lived. '*Krask… I don't know. Something has gone wrong. We were*

overwhelmed and surrounded.’

‘Where are you now, sergeant?’

‘*Closing on your position, but we are embattled by a second force.*’

‘Can you hold them until we arrive?’

‘*Negative, brother-captain. Varr has cleansed and burned behind us, but the flames will only keep them at bay for so long. Our lead was scant to begin with and is being eroded. We are falling back.*’

‘Understood. In your opinion, can we effect a breach in their lines given our current strength?’

‘*Unless you are several full strength battle squads, brother-captain… again, negative.*’

Obek arched his neck and exhaled loudly. Hyper-aggressive endorphins in his blood had dulled his pain to a throbbing ache, but could do nothing for his frustration.

‘How long?’

The distant sounds of gunfire intensified, growing louder by the second.

‘*Imminently, brother-captain.*’

Obek looked to Xen.

‘Can we hold them here?’

There was little cover, save for the shallow alcoves running down the walls.

‘If even a tenth of the force Zandu says is coming for us is behind him then, no, we cannot.’ He stripped out his bolt pistol and gave it to Obek, who nodded in thanks, checked the clip and sight, then slipped it into the holster where his own sidearm had been.

Then he turned to T’kell.

‘You should not have come back for me. It was reckless.’

Xen stepped in to answer. ‘Would you have left one of us, brother-captain?’

Obek could hardly argue with that. He gripped Xen’s pauldron, then turned back to T’kell.

‘I am sorry, Forgefather. The Unscarred have failed you, we have failed the primarch, but we shall at least die with honour.’

‘We are not dead yet,’ T’kell replied. He had his back to Obek and was regarding the door to the Wrought.

It was large, far larger than any of the Salamanders legionaries, and ornate, the metal carved with intricate care and an artisan’s skill, but with an

impenetrability to rival any bastion gate. No locks were in evidence, no bars or visible defences of any kind, just the sigil and the mechanism with the drake's fanged maw. Blood shone on the teeth, not fresh, not Obek's. His wounds had been cauterised on impact.

'It did not work?' T'kell asked, as the sound of battle came increasingly closer. They could even make out Zandu's bellowed imprecations to Vulkan and the wild laughter of Zeb'du Varr.

'Forgefather?'

Xen and the others had assumed firing positions, kneeling to make for smaller targets or pressed into the alcoves.

'The door,' said T'kell. 'Your blood. It is sealed still. Did it not work, whatever the adept was attempting?'

'He tried and failed.'

T'kell lifted his arm to the light as if to examine it…

'Part of *me* is still flesh and blood. I have to believe Vulkan bestowed this burden upon me for a reason. I think the door was gene-coded to me alone.'

…and thrust his hand into the mouth of the drake sigil.

FOURTEEN

The last legacy of Vulkan

Kurnan heard it in the deeps. A low churning of earth, a dulled echo of metal striking metal, mechanisms sliding into place and the awakening of the machine. The door…

Vulkan's armoury, at last laid open for them to pillage.

Ahead of him, the corridor was burning and the flames were kicking out heat intense enough to melt plastek and warp metal. The battle-servitors suffered greatly. Their dead, gelid flesh curled and then blackened before finally sloughing away. Some collapsed amidst the firestorm; others, those possessing a modicum of remembered self-preservation, did pause.

Kurnan crouched behind one of the dull-eyed servitors, using it as a meat shield as he cycled through the vision filters of his retinal lenses. Thick, oily smoke was spilling off the blaze in a pall but Kurnan found his enemies through the miasma and bellowed orders at his warriors to return fire. The Salamanders had fallen back in good order, but they had to know their plight was a hopeless one.

Always outnumbered, thought Kurnan, *destined to die.*

One firestorm met another, and then a third as both sides exchanged fusillades of hard shells and las-bolts.

'Fire…' he grumbled to Solomus, who fell in beside him. 'Why is it always fire with these legionaries?'

The servitor meat shields jerked and thrashed as the bolter shells hit them.

'Weren't they born in it, or some such myth?'

'They'll die in it this day,' chimed Krede. One-handed, he could only wield a bolt pistol and as he stretched out his arm to shoot, a round clipped him and blew apart his chin and most of the left side of his face. In agony, clutching at his ruined face with his one good hand, Krede crashed forwards into the fire and the upper half of his body ignited.

Kurnan looked on aggrieved, but Solomus merely shrugged. 'Never have I met an unluckier soul than Krede, but I echo his sentiment,' he said. The other two Sons of Horus legionaries, Menatus and Ghodak, went to drag the body out of the flames, but Kurnan waved them back.

‘He’s dead. Stay down.’

The fires were dying out – the servitors had absorbed much of their wrath and it had told on their numbers. They advanced now, those that still burned and those that followed in their wake, implacable and relentless. In their shadow, Solomus began to rise. ‘Let’s just kill these sons of the Drake.’

The rest of the Sons were coming. Kurnan had heard them over the vox. He and Solomus were but the vanguard.

Kurnan followed him into the storm, into the fury. So did Menatus and Ghodak. Harkus, who had fought in the battle above, was not far behind with Ezriah and Uziel, and with them came reinforcements of a different calibre to Mechanicum drones.

Plunging into smoke, Kurnan felt his hatred rise anew. For the servitors and their slacked-jawed obeisance, for the adept and his arrogance, for Solomus’ impudence and the Salamanders legionaries’ refusal to just die. A barbed thing had grown within him ever since Isstvan III, violently flourishing with every betrayal and act of dishonour that came afterwards. But the deepest barb he reserved for an especial hatred – the deepest he left for himself.

The doors to the Wrought ground open with a sound like tortured metal and for a moment the Salamanders legionaries stared, beholding a gateway to a mythical ark to which, after much struggle, they had finally gained admittance.

Darkness beckoned, and the flickering glow of auto-sconces.

Zandu had reached the infiltration squad by now, Varr too, though the number of Salamanders legionaries in their force was painfully low. They came past Xen’s sentries, battered and war weary, stopping at the threshold of Vulkan’s legendary armoury.

‘I smell cinder and ash,’ murmured Obek and fought the urge to bow his head.

‘We have no time for observance,’ said T’kell. His voice sounded strained, causing Obek to look over to him, but the Techmarine waved off his concern. ‘We have this chance now, only this. Into the Wrought!’

Obek led them in, his borrowed bolt pistol held out before him. He went fast, his strength returning, las and shell fire chasing him into the shadows, with Zandu and the others closing protectively around their wounded captain.

Xen and the rest still held the corridor as the renegades came through the conflagration laid down by Varr. Having joined up with Zandu, Raios now took up position with the infiltration squad and together they maintained a suppressing fire.

T'kell lingered by the door, and shouted to the Vexillary now.

'Xen… Flamesmote! We fall back now.'

'To never know glory,' said Xen, shouting above the roar of the bolters, 'to be denied vengeance…'

'Dying here in this place is not glorious–' T'kell faltered, clutching his forehead, but Xen was preoccupied with the firefight and barely noticed. 'Nor will it bring us vengeance.'

Xen kept up his rate of fire but what came back in return outweighed it more than tenfold. Phokan was hit, a solid impact in the chest that his armour bore the brunt of. Then Gairon, spitting a cry of pain as his knee was blown apart.

'Can you close it?' Xen yelled, covering Raios as he went to grab Gairon and drag him back against the wall.

'Now who's the *vengu*,' he heard Raios mutter to the veteran, earning a grunted invective in reply.

'I can,' said T'kell. 'This door between them and us. No way in. An armoury at our disposal. We can prevail, brother.'

Xen relented and gave the order for the squad to fall back.

Once they were through the door, T'kell engaged the mechanism, this time to close the vault behind them. It did so quickly, the inviolable slab of primarch-wrought metal coming down like the lid to a tomb as the last futile shots from farther down the corridor slipped through but missed their targets, and as the door struck the ground it echoed with a resounding clang.

'We are here then, at last…' T'kell's voice echoed off glinting obsidian as he addressed the last of the Unscarred. Hunched silhouettes of deep drakes regarded them from the shadows as if in silent appraisal. It was a mere entrance chamber, though vast in and of itself. Several others fed off from it into the seemingly infinite shadows.

'The Wrought,' he said, the others turning to face him. 'The last legacy of Vulkan.'

Kurnan reached the door long after it had already closed.

Tentatively, his gauntleted fingers quested around the drake sigil and the mechanism he understood was located somewhere in its mouth. He

considered trying it when he remembered what had happened to Krede and slowly drew away his hand.

His gorge rose as he sensed the presence of Rayko Solomus nearby.

‘Master Regulus is dead.’

So matter-of-fact, so dismissive. Kurnan had to resist the urge to kill him almost every time they exchanged words.

‘And his beast.’

‘It was a Castellax. An advanced war machine.’

Solomus laughed. ‘*We* are advanced, brother.’ He rolled over a shredded piece of robot carapace. ‘Not this thing. Not *them*.’

Kurnan glanced over Solomus’ shoulder at the battle-servitors standing in ragged ranks, awaiting instruction. They stared ahead with dead eyes, only moving when Harkus and the others shouldered past them.

‘How do we breach it?’ asked the legionary tersely. Harkus looked battle ready with his chainsword still bared and his armour flecked with blood. Some said his zealousness in killing the internecine traitors at Isstvan III had bordered on the obscene, but far from a kindred spirit, Kurnan saw only a maniac before him. Some of the XVI had never truly left Cthonia, and so it was said of Harkus.

‘Charges. Incendiaries. Everything we have got,’ Kurnan told him. ‘Muster the labour servitors down here too, those with drills and cutters. No door is unbreakable, not even one fashioned by a primarch.’

Harkus gave a curt, dissatisfied grunt but went about his orders.

‘The emissary reckoned this metal could not be pierced by charges,’ said Menatus, he and Ghodak joining the two legionaries at the door. ‘I heard him say even meltas would not cut it.’

‘It’s why we had to keep that Drake, and not kill him,’ added Ghodak.

‘We still have his arm,’ offered Solomus, gesturing to the Salamanders legionary’s severed limb on the ground.

Kurnan removed his helm so he could wipe some of the sweat from his scalp, using the opportunity to eye Solomus sternly. ‘I can never tell if you are serious, sarcastic or just psychotic.’

Solomus had taken off his helm too, the rad-scrubbed air making it possible to do so without risk, and made a facial shrug.

‘Me neither,’ he said.

Kurnan scowled, and tried not to think about how much he wanted to bury his combat knife in Solomus’ grinning face. ‘The limb is useless. We won’t

unlock it from this side. We have to use force.’

‘That,’ uttered one of the servitors in a mechanised monotone, causing the legionaries to turn with weapons drawn, ‘is unnecessary, and extremely unwise,’ and it turned its dead eyes on Kurnan.

FIFTEEN

Besieged

Obek paced the large, dark atrium in the shadow of drakes. The ebon statues looked down at him from their stone plinths, as if measuring his every deed.

‘Was there no word? Nothing?’

Zandu shook his head, weary. He sat on a metal crate, one of hundreds in the entrance chamber. A cursory recon had revealed the first twenty or so armouries were well stocked, but to search every single room would have taken days, perhaps weeks, so the Salamanders had stayed near the entrance and secured the immediate area. The Wrought was meant to have room enough for the *Chalice of Fire*, so somewhere in its vastness was a hangar, but it was beyond the Salamanders legionaries’ reach. At least for now. Small parties of legionaries had been sent farther afield than the initial chambers, to gather supplies, weapons and ammunition.

Mercifully, given the grim state of their number, materiel was in abundance.

Apothecary Fai’sho was standing between his captain and the sergeant. As soon as the briefing was over, he would return to tending to Obek’s wounds and then the rest of the injured. Obek had insisted they take stock first and formulate a plan. Part of that plan should have involved Krask and Zau’ull.

‘We must assume they either made planetfall and were neutralised,’ Obek said, not wishing to dwell on that particular possibility, ‘or they were irrevocably delayed. Either way, we are facing this enemy without them.’

None spoke of what that might mean for the *Chalice of Fire* or the artefacts of Vulkan the Unscarred had been charged with delivering. This place was meant to be a safehold, the end of their mission. Instead, it had turned into a fight for survival. T’kell had said nothing of the artefacts or what they should do with them now, and was not present for the briefing either.

‘We have to force a breach,’ said Zandu. ‘And must act quickly. How many other entry points does this place have? If we wait too long, we increase the chance of an assault on a second front. There are weapons here that can help us.’ He had removed his helm, as most of the legionaries had,

and his face looked waxy and drained. Fai’sho had questioned it, but Zandu had told him he was fine. After the Apothecary had pressed further, Zandu showed him why Themians had such a fierce reputation, and that was the end to it.

Obek nodded, absent-mindedly rubbing the stump of his arm. It was hard not to imagine it itching or being able to grip with it, but he supposed he would adjust. He turned to the last of the gathered officers.

‘Varr, what say you? You’re quiet, Pyrus. I don’t like it.’

Varr had been looking off into the distance, as if seeing something none of the others could perceive. Most thought him slightly mad, some saying he had stared into the heart of Deathfire too long and been afflicted by it. Certainly, he was strange, but Obek had always thought Varr possessed a sort of shamanic wisdom that reminded him of tales of the earth-shamans of old Nocturne. Then again, perhaps Varr was just insane.

He turned to Obek with a look of utter certitude on his scarred face.

‘Someone else is in here with us.’

Perhaps Zandu’s notion about an assault on a second front had already become reality.

‘What?’

There was a pause, as if everyone were gauging the veracity of what Varr had just said.

‘Where?’ asked Obek, trusting Varr’s instincts and pulling out his borrowed pistol.

The other legionaries reached for their weapons.

‘Fai’sho, make sure the door is secure. Find T’kell,’ said Obek, and the Apothecary nodded before heading off.

A shouted warning came a moment later from somewhere deeper in the Wrought. It was Xen.

‘Zandu, Varr,’ he told the others, ‘you are with me.’

They found Xen outside one of the arming chambers. He had Raios and Phokan with him.

The Wrought was truly vast and comprised dozens, maybe even hundreds of weapon chambers, ammunition vaults, armouries and even hangars. In the short time they had been cloistered inside, the Salamanders had scarcely scratched the edge of what it harboured.

‘Hold here,’ Xen said as Obek approached. Phokan and Raios had formed a perimeter at either end of an arch that led into the room, guns trained

inwards.

‘Be careful with those,’ said Obek to the legionaries.

Given the sheer amount of stockpiled war materiel, any stray shell could instigate a devastating chain reaction that would tear the Wrought apart and them with it.

Obek drew in close to the vexillary.

‘Show me…’

‘At first I mistook it for an empty suit of Mark Four.’ Xen gestured with his blade and Obek followed where it pointed in the darkness to a room filled with dusty war-plate. It was ranked up and arrayed in files that went at least six deep.

‘Phokan found it. He thought we could use the war-plate to patch up our own. And you need a fresh helm, brother-captain.’

Something was moving; Obek saw it now. In the darkness, in the sheer vastness, it had been hard to discern, but a figure went slowly from one suit of power armour to the next. It was bulky, easily the size of a legionary.

‘Have you hailed it?’ asked Obek.

‘It could not have failed to hear my warning, but gave no reaction. I would dearly like to shoot it.’

‘Not until we know who or what it is. Are all our legionaries accounted for?’

Xen nodded, then cursed. ‘This place is a damn labyrinth, impossible to recon from the inside. There could be an army in here and we would never know.’

‘There is definitely an army out there, brother, one that’s intent on killing us,’ said Obek. ‘I’ll take our chances in here.’

‘I could draw it out, brother-captain,’ offered Raios, ‘confront it. See what we’re up against.’

‘Ever eager, *vengu*,’ muttered Phokan, earning a scowl from the other Drake.

Obek ignored them, instead turning to Xen, who nodded again.

‘Do it,’ Obek said to Raios, who gave an ardent salute before breaking off from his brothers. ‘The rest of you make ready.’

Fai’sho found T’kell. He was standing before the door to the Wrought, muttering to himself.

‘Forgefather?’ Fai’sho ventured.

T’kell barely moved. Apart from Fai’sho, he was alone and had his back to the Apothecary. He took a step towards the door.

‘Brother, what are you doing?’ asked Fai’sho.

‘I cannot…’

As Fai’sho reached him, T’kell turned around. His plasma pistol glinted in the torchlight and drew the Apothecary’s eye.

‘Wha–?’

‘I cannot… stop it!’

T’kell fired.

Raios had crossed into the arming chamber, his bolter nestled in the crook of his arm and against his chin as he closed on the figure.

‘Turn,’ he warned, ‘turn and identify yourself. Do it–’

‘I pose no threat to you, legionary.’

It stepped into the light, revealing a Mechanicum adept in red robes. It looked human enough, but most of its body, all that Raios could see at least, was cybernetic.

‘Who are you?’

Obek and the others had followed, leaving Phokan behind as rearguard.

The adept turned his gaze upon the Salamanders captain.

‘An archivist, left here by my Martian masters. Did you think your Lord Vulkan built this place alone? I am tasked with its upkeep, its cataloguing.’

‘Its protection?’ asked Xen, not yet having let down his guard.

The archivist addressed him. ‘I have no combat faculties at all, though I do possess extensive knowledge of this armoury and the war materiel confined within. For instance, I know there is a hangar at the core of the Wrought large enough for a forge ship. I also know Vulkan intended for this place to harbour his greatest creations.’

Zandu turned to Obek, and murmured, ‘Perhaps we can use him?’

‘This place can no longer be a safehold for the artefacts,’ Obek mused aloud. ‘But his knowledge could prove useful.’ He addressed the archivist. ‘Do you know where the larger weapons are kept? The sentry guns, rapiers, tarantulas?’

The archivist nodded.

‘I have extensive knowledge of this armoury, as I have already said.’

‘He is as irritating as most Martians,’ uttered Xen, lowering his aim.

‘But first, an interrogative,’ said the archivist.

Obek frowned, confused at the sudden turn of events, but the adept was unarmed and had his hands by his sides. His robes betrayed no weapons, nor did his posture suggest a threat, and yet…

‘Do you have the primarch’s artefacts with you now?’ asked the archivist. ‘Are they located somewhere on this world?’

Scowling, Obek raised his bolt pistol again.

‘Who are you? Really? What is your business here?’

‘You know who I am,’ the archivist told him, but did not make any gesture, threatening or otherwise. His voice emanated from a vocal emitter buried somewhere in his robes and behind his hood.

Eyes widening, Obek realised the truth. ‘The adept…’

Again, the archivist nodded, but a puppet on another’s binaric strings.

‘How?’ asked Xen. ‘He was dead.’

‘I was. I am,’ said Regulus in the voice of the archivist. ‘I am not. All of these states of being, however contradictory they must seem, are true. You are welcome to consider the implications, but I theorise understanding *my* nature will be of secondary importance to you.’

Xen raised his bolter. They all did.

‘It will not matter,’ Regulus told them. ‘Have you not worked it out yet?’

‘Kill it,’ said Obek.

The Salamanders legionaries fired and the archivist was destroyed, but in the dying roar of the muzzle flare they heard another sound echoing through the armoury.

Xen turned to the others.

‘The door…’

It was opening.

Fai’sho was almost certainly dead. Lying face down, a smouldering hole had been cored through the Apothecary’s torso and came out through his ruptured power pack. The absence of much blood suggested a plasma wound.

His killer was standing before them and all ember-red eyes were drawn to him.

‘T’kell…’

Obek was first to speak, but had yet to lower his weapon.

‘What are you doing?’

The mechanism for the door had been engaged and a wafer-thin crack appeared at its base as it began to rise.

‘I am… not in control,’ T’kell sputtered, his mechanised voice pained with all-too-human agony.

‘Captain!’ Xen stepped in front of Obek, readying to fire. ‘He is armed.’

T’kell had his plasma pistol in his hand, held at waist height but not yet primed to fire.

‘Halt the mechanism,’ Obek told him, urging Xen aside. ‘Do it, Forgefather.’

‘I want to… I…’ He tapped his forehead. ‘He’s in here… The scrapcode, it infected me. I thought I had… purged it. I was wrong.’

The plasma pistol seemed to rise of its own volition, and Xen and the others were about to fire when Obek shouted, ‘Wait!’

The door was rising, and T’kell could not or would not stop it. He had a gun to them, one he had already used to take out Fai’sho.

‘Muster whoever’s left,’ Obek said to Xen. ‘Bring up anything we’ve already found and set up a fire cordon. We have no time to argue, brother.’

Xen did as commanded, first backing off and then running deeper into the Wrought, shouting orders down the vox. He took Raios and Phokan with him. Zandu stayed by his captain’s side.

‘You too, sergeant.’

‘Negative, brother-captain.’

Obek looked at him ruefully, but conceded.

‘It was you, wasn’t it,’ he asked T’kell, ‘who struck me from behind at the encampment? Even then, he had you in his thrall.’

T’kell nodded. The plasma pistol rose further. He had almost pressed it to his temple…

‘I can stop it.’

Obek shook his head. ‘Not that way, Forgefather. You are needed. Vulkan gave you a sacred charge, one which you asked me to help you fulfil.’

‘I can stop it.’

T’kell fired.

Obek shouted out, ‘No!’ He reached out for him, but it was too late.

And the door kept on rising.

Kurnan had marshalled his forces outside the door. The corridor was wide enough for a large fire team to rank up ten abreast, so he had the servitors form their vanguard.

His fellow Sons of Horus would advance as a second wave, using the Mechanicum troops as ablative armour.

‘It rises, brother,’ said Ghodak, staring through the massing cyber-organic bodies.

Kurnan nodded, his eyes also on the crack at the base of the door.

‘They will walk into certain destruction without hesitation?’ He asked the only servitor to have broken ranks and joined the legionaries.

‘They neither know nor feel any fear, or sense of self-preservation, captain,’ said the drone in its monotone voice, but with the unmistakable arrogance of Regulus.

‘You are sure, adept? By now, the Salamanders will have had time to make preparations.’

‘Be assured, they will not falter.’

Several hundred had ranked up before the doors, what remained of the skitarii inserted amongst them.

Kurnan’s own forces were less numerous. He reckoned they must be close to whatever the sons of Vulkan still possessed.

‘I want the Techmarine alive, though,’ said the servitor, and there was something sinister about the way it uttered the words so coldly. ‘I have use for him yet. He has knowledge I would possess for my–’

He paused, like an interrupted vox-cast. Dead air reigned for a few seconds.

‘That was unexpected.’

Kurnan scowled. ‘You are lying to me, emissary. And when this is over I will have the truth of what you are doing here.’

The servitor did not answer. Its dead gaze was fixed upon the door that was slowly rising.

Watching and waiting. As soon as it reached halfway and was high enough to pass through, the firefight began.

As Xen activated the sentry guns, Obek and Zandu dragged T’kell behind the firing line.

Arranged in a sickle-shaped ring, facing the doorway from every aspect with enfilading firing solutions, the claw-mounted rapiers and tarantulas roared to life the moment they detected movement.

‘Here they come!’ Xen had to shout to be heard above the thunderous report of the guns. His armour lit up with the muzzle flare, casting it in pale monochrome.

His brothers were lit the same, the warriors of the Unscarred aligned in a shooting formation of their own several feet back from the automated

cannons.

A blistering salvo of return fire met them, las-beams and solid shot meeting in a deathly storm. Three of the sentry guns went down quickly, torn apart from the combined fusillade of a slow-moving but relentless Mechanicum battle cohort.

Despite the toll meted upon them, the servitors kept coming. Some stumbled, trammelled by the bodies of the fallen, only to be crushed by the shambling ranks that followed in their wake.

‘Sons of Vulkan,’ declared Obek, taking up position in the firing line, his bolt pistol held out in front of him, as potent a symbol as any banner or icon, ‘here we stand in the halls of our father’s last legacy. We are all that remains here to defend it.’

He looked to T’kell, his half-blasted skull fused with blood and oil, then Zandu, who looked close to death, and Xen, who had unfurled the banner he so vehemently wanted to discard in favour of a more glorious calling, and knew he would gladly die with these men, these brothers of Nocturne. Even Varr, who could not hide the mania in his eyes, the scar he bore, the scars they all carried…

‘What is the meaning of the sacrifice?’

The door kept rising. The servitors kept coming. The sentry guns steadily fell silent.

An endless horde against a ragged band of sons of the forge…

‘To live when others died,’ the others answered in unison. ‘To never know the pain of our greatest betrayal. To never feel the bite of our reflected shame in the traitor’s knife,’ they cried, voices rising in a crescendo of defiance. ‘To have never bled upon the black sands of Isstvan.’

The horde still came, implacable despite horrific losses, and amidst their ranks was the glint of the war-plate of a Legion turned renegade.

‘I give you your purpose,’ bellowed Obek, gesturing to the traitors, ‘and name us Unscarred no longer! To know glory. To find vengeance. For Vulkan!’

‘For Vulkan!’ came the answering thunder.

The sentry guns had almost fallen. When they did, the Salamanders would finally meet their enemy.

SIXTEEN

Shadow of the black sands

No one could have accused them of not being brave. Courage was not their failing. Not knowing when to give in, not knowing when they were already dead was what undid the sons of Vulkan.

‘Selfless martyrs in a war they will never understand,’ muttered Kurnan. ‘Poor, deluded fools.’

As he advanced behind the vanguard of servitors, little better than meat shields, he snatched glimpses of the Salamanders legionaries through the gaps in the bodies.

Ragged, battle-worn, he knew the Drakes would not go down easily.

What is it they say? Eye to eye, tooth to tooth?

It would be bloody.

‘We should have done this hours ago,’ Solomus said across the vox. He was close, and turned to Kurnan, who could imagine the grin behind the legionary’s faceplate. It disgusted him, but Rayko was right. Hunting the Salamanders down would have gone better than a head-on assault into their guns, meat shield or no.

‘You’ll get to killing soon enough,’ said Kurnan, and cut the feed.

The servitors had taken a beating, their ranks decimated by the auto-defences employed by Kurnan’s black-skinned cousins. Soon enough they would reach the Salamanders legionaries and then the grim toil with blades would begin.

Before the last sentry gun went down, Obek signalled the attack.

Xen led them in at the point of the spear, the others to either flank and behind him. Raios and Phokan were close. He heard their wordless war cries as they fought with the tenacity expected of Firedrakes. Xen took a servitor in the throat with his first thrust, the reverse blow severing its head, but he didn’t pause. Raios had moved ahead a step, splitting a skitarii down the clavicle and tearing off its arm. Phokan took it down, hammering it with his shoulder guard as it flailed for its firearm and stomping into the chest cavity once it was on its back.

Drakos flashed as Xen swung it overhead, taking the lead again as he hacked into the chest of a second automaton. *Ignus* cleaved in from the side and the two swords met with a clash of metal and bisected the servitor.

Again he pressed on into the horde, blood and oil sluicing off his blades as he wrenched them loose, Raios and Phokan in his peripheral vision and matching him step for step.

‘To never know glory,’ he roared.

‘To be denied vengeance,’ shouted Raios and Phokan together.

Several servitors were dead, even more were critically wounded and a small cordon had opened up around Xen, affording him enough time to sheathe *Ignus* and clutch a fistful of the banner he had draped over his shoulders like a mantle. It was already drenched in gore but as he raised it aloft, the Unscarred declared their fury.

A second line of skitarii entered the fray, firing their carbines and culverins with frenetic abandon. The urgency was akin to fear, a manifestation of the transhuman dread experienced by all who fought against Space Marines and were not transhuman themselves. Even the servitors, those that had some mote of consciousness remaining, appeared reluctant to engage when faced with the Drakes’ ferocity.

The Salamanders legionaries used that to their advantage.

As Xen carved a furrow into the heart of the Mechanicum troops, Zandu and Varr anchored either flank with the remnants of their squads.

Zandu had neither the skill nor finesse of Xen, but he traded it for brute aggression. His chainsword reaped a red tally, spattering him with blood and oil. Hacking down one servitor, pushing the burring teeth into its gelid flesh until the blade bit deep, he stamped on the skull of another that had been trying to rise. A third he seized around the throat, his other hand still wrapped around the hilt of his chainsword, and squeezed until his gauntleted fingers met and the servitor’s head came off in his hand.

No less relentless, Varr wielded a thunder hammer, his wild laughter at odds with his apparent metronomic efficiency. *Smiter,* as he unsubtly named it, was usually slung across his back, stowed away whilst his flamer took preference, but this was close work, too close for fire and so he bore the hammer.

‘Vulkan!’ he roared, every stroke of *Smiter* punctuated by the crack of yielding metal or bone.

If he saw Vulkan in those moments of fury, he did not say, but he fought like a legionary beneath the judgement of his primarch.

They all did, or so it felt.

It wasn't some cold armoury the Salamanders defended. It was *his* body, *his* flesh. It was all that remained of the Lord of Drakes.

It might as well be his tomb, thought Obek as he watched Xen dismember and dismantle with an executioner's precision.

The captain followed in the wake of the vanguard, but stayed close on Xen's heels. Despite their eagerness, Phokan and Raios kept dropping back so Obek had protection on either flank. It galled him to be considered in need of these outriders but down to one arm, he was not the warrior he used to be. Still, his bolt pistol never fell silent in his grasp, roaring in single and three-round bursts to conserve the clip. A reload at this point would be difficult. As soon as it clanked dry, the hard dull echo of an empty chamber, he would leave it and draw the combat blade sheathed at his hip.

Through the brutal melee the servitors struggled to weather, Obek saw a skitarii bear down on Raios. He shot it through its glowering optics, violently detonating the cranium a moment later.

Raios flashed a surprised but relieved glance in Obek's direction.

'You can thank me later, *vengu*,' said the captain, earning a curt nod from the other Drake.

As Raios felled another drone, Obek shot one that had managed to circle around and attack from his blind side almost point-blank.

'Xen,' he said across the vox, 'ease up. They are getting around us.'

A compliance icon flashed up on Obek's left retinal lens but a cursory appraisal of the battle suggested they would be surrounded anyway.

He thought about signalling a retreat. They could fall back, deeper into the armoury and make the renegades fight room by room, but he almost immediately dismissed this idea. Obek knew they didn't have the numbers. It was why they hadn't done it in the first place.

And it dawned upon him then, as he saw two Drakes fall to an onslaught of mechanised blades and watched Gairon speared through the chest and his left pauldron hacked apart, that this had never been about survival or escape.

This is our Dropsite Massacre. This is our Isstvan V. This is where we die.

Gairon struck down his attacker, but bled profusely from the gaps in his war-plate.

Obek hailed Votan.

A Drake had to stay behind and protect T’kell and Fai’sho, a precaution that hardly seemed to matter now.

‘Kill as many as you can, Votan, but do not let either of our stricken brothers fall into their hands.’

‘*Understood, brother-captain.*’

‘Vulkan lives, Votan.’

‘*We honour him with our sacrifice.*’

Bitterness caused Obek’s gorge to rise, like acid in his mouth. He ended the feed.

More Salamanders legionaries were dying and as a hand recoils when struck, the sons of Vulkan pulled into a tight formation. It was almost inviolable, but then many last stands were.

Not until the Sons of Horus entered the carnage did Obek truly see the end approaching.

Kurnan saw their captain, and knew this was the one he needed to kill.

His honour demanded nothing less.

True, the Drake had lost an arm, but he had still killed three of Kurnan’s brother legionaries and even now, debilitated as he was, fought ferociously.

He broke through the withering ranks of the Mechanicum cohorts and came blade to blade with a Salamanders legionary. No accusation, no tirade of any kind passed the warrior’s lips, just a fierce intensity born of the knowledge of a forlorn hope.

Kurnan’s men and the remnants of Regulus’ hordes surrounded them. Every second saw the knot tighten, the dreaded noose that all heroes secretly feared, transhuman or not. It was the death of honour, the end to glory. Ignominy.

The stain of that word felt thick on Kurnan’s war-plate, even as he duelled with the Drake, brackish memories of Isstvan V fomenting in his conscious mind.

Backstabber. Treacherous dog… Traitor.

Kurnan disarmed his opponent and rammed his combat blade into the warrior’s pectoral as far as the hilt. He heard a spray of something hitting the inside of the other legionary’s faceplate. Then came a gurgle, and finally choking.

‘I’ve pierced your lungs,’ he whispered, dragging the Drake close so he could use the body as a shield. ‘You are drowning in your own blood.’

The warrior jerked, trying to fight the inevitable.

‘It won’t matter,’ said Kurnan, twisting the blade and then forcing it upwards. He pushed so hard it lifted the legionary off his feet. ‘You can’t fight this. Not this.’ The light died in the legionary’s eyes. Kurnan saw it through the red retinal lenses, like a fire suddenly doused.

Retaliation came swiftly, and Kurnan turned the dead Drake’s body just before a chainblade hit. Blood and metal shards cascaded outwards from the wound, the squeal of chain teeth chewing up ceramite merging with the enraged grief of a legionary cutting into his fellow legionary.

Still clutching his meat shield, Kurnan yanked out the blade in a welter of blood. Then he heaved back on the body, trapping the other Drake’s sword, which was jammed in the dead warrior’s war-plate. As the Drake desperately tried to free his weapon, Kurnan leaned in and stabbed him in the neck, in the gap between helmet and gorget.

He did it three more times in quick succession and then parried another blade aimed at his neck, before denting the side of his assailant’s war-helm with his gauntleted fist. Reeling, the legionary fell back into the bodies of his brothers. The Salamanders had closed ranks. A retreat was in effect.

An ever-widening gap emerged between Kurnan and his enemies.

He raised his fist and all battle ceased. The servitors were dead; only the skitarii remained and even they respected the stand-off between old comrades.

‘What are you doing?’ the sibilant voice of Solomus came through on the vox. *‘Let’s finish them.’*

‘This isn’t Isstvan. I won’t do that again,’ Kurnan said, and in a lower voice added, ‘We’re warriors, not assassins.’

‘We are whatever Horus needs us to be,’ hissed Solomus. He prowled the edge of the fight like a creature of the Legion’s old namesake, stepping over the bodies already added to his butcher’s tally. His cold eyes searched for who next would bloody his sword. Kurnan wanted only one and, ignoring Solomus’ impudence, found the warrior in the middle of a dwindling shield wall of drake-green power armour.

There is at least some honour left in this galaxy.

He raised his sword, the chain teeth still wet and glistening. The stink of it, the blood and the sweat, almost overwhelmed the heady scent of ash and cinder. It was choking, and Kurnan decided he wanted to be rid of this place in short order.

‘You…’ he uttered, raising his voice so it carried above the drone of many chainblades burring in discordant union. ‘Captain to captain.’

It was over. Obek knew it. He had known it before they had even entered the Wrought, but denial was a powerful emotion in Nocturnean culture. Some called it defiance.

He felt the huddle of armoured bodies around him, heard their breath sawing through their faceplates and smelt their blood and the blood of the renegades on their war-plate. Stained, scarred, but far from glorious and with only a shred of vengeance to show for all the death.

Is this what Isstvan V was like?

No black sand underfoot, just black obsidian, their blood and that of their enemies almost invisible upon it.

Obek met the gaze of the other captain and shouldered his way forwards.

Xen tried to step in. ‘Brother-captain–’

‘Don’t try to stop me.’ Raios was bleeding all over the floor, stabbed in the neck. Gairon was lying nearby, a jagged cleft in his chest that tore all the way up to his throat. They were not alone. Not nearly.

Xen held out a sword, a serrated spatha of rare craft. ‘This is *Drakos*. Its edge has never failed me.’

Obek thought about refusing, but could not dishonour the gift. Instead he nodded, sheathing his ruddy combat blade to take up the green-tinged spatha.

‘A fine companion for an honour duel.’

‘There is nothing honourable in this,’ said Xen, his eyes on the renegade captain. ‘He will not be, and you only have one hand, my captain.’

Obek smiled, and it felt like a lifetime since he had done so and meant it. He supposed it was not joy or gladness he felt, but something more like relief.

‘I need only one,’ he said, and his mood abruptly darkened, ‘to kill this dog at least. When it is done–’

‘We will not be taken alive.’

Eye to eye, they locked forearms, although Xen gripped a cauterised stump. ‘I have shamed us. I see that now.’

‘Atone by avenging my death,’ laughed Obek. He thought of T’kell and the pledge he made to him, which he would fail, and all those who had come to the Wrought in search of purpose and honour, but found only death. It made finding the resolve to do what he had to do next easier.

‘Come then,’ Obek told the captain, ‘if you are so willing to die.’

They exchanged a curt salute. Obek knew the odds favoured his opponent, but he had killed three of theirs in single combat and that counted for something.

‘In Vulk–’ he began, but stopped short. A blade was sunk several inches into his chest, and he staggered before he saw the renegade with his hand outstretched and realised he had thrown it.

‘Damn it, Solomus!’ the renegade captain roared, before chaos erupted anew.

Xen rushed the blade thrower, this Solomus, as Zandu and Phokan hauled Obek to his feet. One of the renegades peeled off from the half-circle of warriors to intercept, but Xen cut him down with *Ignus* before he could even utter a war cry. He kicked the corpse aside, his stride barely interrupted and met the hastily drawn blade of Rayko Solomus.

The other Salamanders were fighting too, a rush of blades and armour too swift and varied to truly account for as they engaged enemies. Xen’s attention was fixed on one.

Solomus was fast, his gladius a blur, which, unlike Xen’s sword, was an ugly thing, just a tool for killing with all the brutality that required. His skills were anything but, and Xen almost immediately went onto the defensive.

The Son of Horus fought with a raw aggression and intensity Xen had rarely come up against. He had been in battle before, mainly during the Crusade, and that kind of instinct never left, but the edge… that could be blunted by time.

Xen parried, but could find no opening. He wished he had *Drakos* too; the other blade would have given a sorely needed advantage. He caught sight of Obek, getting to his feet, yanking out the thrown blade. Phokan and Zandu were in front of him, fending off the renegades, but they were getting pinned down.

‘You’ll die just like your brothers died, bleeding and without hope,’ said Solomus.

Xen took a glancing blow against his forearm. It bit deep, through ceramite and adamantium, into flesh. It hurt but he smiled anyway as his thrust took the renegade in his right pectoral. The armour absorbed much of the impact but Solomus grunted in pain. A second blow, an overhead, met the edge of the renegade’s steel and drew sparks. Xen swiped at his flank, but found this parried too. A second thrust… Solomus smacked it aside with

his palm so swiftly that Xen could scarcely believe he had done it. The momentary delay was telling.

A punch to his solar plexus sent Xen reeling. Just a step or two, but it was enough to put him off balance. Solomus drew a second blade, third if counting the one he had thrown into Obek. Ugly as the others, it had a hooked tip and a dark sheen.

The thrust came at Xen so fast he nearly missed it. He parried the blade but not the one with the hook that followed and bit in the place between his shoulder guard and his neck. He felt a lurch as Solomus dragged him forwards, pulling his right shoulder to the left and turning him savagely. He missed the jab that cut into his side and the blow across his cheek that exploded white fire into his right eye.

Xen staggered and experienced something he had not felt before.

Defeat.

His vision fogging, he felt something slide into his chest and down. Hot at first, but then cold, even as his blood gushed across his armour. Now he fell, to one knee and then the other in close succession. *Ignus* glinted just beyond his reach. He could not remember dropping it.

Solomus loomed above him. ‘Bleeding and without hope…’

He raised both blades. It was hard not to think of them as a guillotine.

‘Vulkan lives…’ said Xen, and prepared to meet his fate – until sound and fury tore the chamber apart.

Solomus half turned to meet a billowing explosion. It threw him off his feet before seizing Xen too and a host of others. Salamanders and Sons of Horus were tossed aside like ash in the wind.

A thought imposed itself in Xen’s few remaining moments of consciousness.

Krask.

SEVENTEEN

The Raven and the Gorgon

Phokan and Zandu were dragging Obek back to where T’kell and Fai’sho were lying when he heard the faint clink of grenades hitting the ground and shouted a rasped warning.

‘Down!’

He saw Phokan and Zandu brace as a thunderous roar shook the chamber, filling it with smoke and fire. Moments later there came the stolid drumming of bolters. Zandu’s hand on his shoulder kept him down and Phokan had interposed his body also, obscuring the view, but Obek saw the warriors moving through the slowly dissipating pall of smoke.

A bolt shell struck one of the renegades, twisting him around with the impact before two more put him down. Several muzzle flashes lit up the gloom at once as a steady fusillade struck out at the Sons of Horus, who reacted with return fire of their own.

Obek’s first thought was Zau’ull and the Wyvern, but the legionary who emerged first out of the smoke had black armour and a Corvus-pattern helm, and was not a Chaplain. He carried a long sword with a crackling energy blade. Dust motes burst into flame as they touched the weapon’s power field.

Obek had thought they were all dead or scattered to the galactic winds.

The son of Corax wasn’t with his brothers, but he also wasn’t alone. Black-armoured warriors came in his wake, a white gauntlet emblazoned on their shoulder guards. The Iron Tenth, the Gorgon’s sons.

‘Iron Hands…’

Led by one of the XIX, these warriors were known to Obek. He didn’t know what business the so-called Shattered Legions had with the Wrought. That would come later, if he survived.

A shadow scythed a path through the Sons of Horus.

As Xen’s body fought to stabilise in the wake of his critical injuries, he realised what he was looking at. It was one of the sons of Corax. As many had, he had assumed they were all dead or scattered beyond recall. The Raven Guard in his midst reflected no light, yet simultaneously drew in the

illumination cast by the auto-sconces. He *was* shadow, the two a conjoined entity.

The Raven Guard met Solomus just inside the threshold of the vault. The battle had yet to progress past it, with the Salamanders still clinging on. Out of some ingrained martial instinct, Xen tried to rise, and grabbed his sword. The grip felt unfamiliar in his numbed fingers and he barely held on to it. He managed a half step before collapsing. A slick of blood had pooled beneath him, leaking from his armour where Solomus had driven in his blade.

Kill him… Xen willed, powerless to do anything but watch, but determined to stay conscious long enough to see the outcome.

As the Raven Guard came at him, Solomus attacked with both blades, high and low, feint and thrust. They met nothing but shadow as plasteel struck air. The blood in Xen's eyes made him blink. It was inside his helm, trickling down his face. In the second it took for Xen's eyelid to close and reopen, the Raven Guard… *shifted*. He could think of no other way to describe it. He was smoke caught on the wind, slipping away from harm and coalescing at the traitor's unprotected flank.

Xen watched Solomus grunt, then jerk in pain as several feet of XIX Legion steel impaled his body. He turned his neck, just enough so his maddened gaze fell on his killer for a final look, a last curse, before the Raven Guard wrenched free his sword and cleaved Solomus in half.

After that, Xen slumped and let swift oblivion take him.

The Drakes still fought doggedly as the Raven Guard legionary swept through the Wrought, cutting down renegades who had been caught the worst by the explosion but who were still alive. The Iron Hands came in his wake, cold and implacable, and Obek ordered his warriors to cease fire for fear of hitting their allies.

The Salamanders gathered shoulder to shoulder and rallied around their captain, who had regained his feet.

It took less than a minute after the initial incursion for the Shattered Legions to secure the Wrought and execute all but a few of the traitors who had fought their way out and fled. In the aftermath of the battle, the two forces stood and regarded one another, but it was a stand-off born of curiosity and uncertainty, not a preface to violence.

'They are Shattered Legions,' muttered Zandu, having heard about them from the survivors of the Ruinstorm.

Obek nodded, but his eyes were on the Raven Guard, who had stopped to clean his sword. The Iron Hands had stopped too, but they remained stock still, boltguns lowered but still readied. Although he wanted to, Obek did not feel relief. Neither did his brothers, judging by the weapons that remained unsheathed and unholstered in their hands.

'We are indebted to you,' he said, and then after a short pause 'Brothers.'

Obek came forwards past his men.

No reaction came from the Iron Hands, who remained still, except for one. A shield-bearer – he turned his head away from the Salamanders legionaries whilst the others stared coldly through their retinal lenses. The Raven Guard came forwards, though. He had taken something from a pouch on his belt and presented it to the captain.

A hololithic emitter. Obek immediately recognised it. A grainy image issued from the holo-lens a moment later, another Iron Hands legionary, if his bionics and the metal clad to half of his face was any gauge. He looked old and scarred, and had a sharp beard that resembled a piece of shrapnel.

'*I am Kastigan Ulok, Iron Father,*' he uttered in a hollow, metallic voice. '*Know that you are saved, Salamanders. Know that you are now guests of the Shattered Legions.*'

Obek nodded solemnly, and ordered the others to stow their weapons.

'*Morikan will take you to my ship, the* Obstinate. *There is much for us to discuss, son of the Drake. Much indeed.*'

The Raven Guard, evidently Morikan, closed his hand to end the transmission. He beckoned once and then turned.

'Have you encountered our ship?' Obek asked, calling out to him, but the son of Corax didn't react. 'We have injured here, we need–'

The shield-bearer interrupted. His voice was deep and cold, but carried some compassion. 'Your needs will be met,' he said, and took off his helm. A severe-looking warrior with pale skin and coal-dark hair closely cropped to his scalp stared back at Obek. 'I am Ahrem Gallikus, of Clan Gaarsak.' He extended a hand and Obek took it. 'Saurian will look to your wounded.' Gallikus regarded Obek's severed arm. 'And I believe I can take care of that.'

Obek's eyes narrowed. 'Saurian? Is he…'

'A Salamander, yes. He has been with the *Obstinate* since the beginning.'

'I should like to speak with him once we are aboard.'

‘And he you,’ Gallikus replied, giving a half-glance at the other Iron Hands legionaries now filing out of the chamber, ‘but Ulok will want to talk to you first.’

‘And the Wrought?’ asked Obek, gesturing to the weapons vault.

‘Ah,’ Gallikus replied, ‘is that what you call it? Ulok will want access to it and everything within it.’

Zandu scowled. ‘What?’

Obek raised his hand to placate him, but said to Gallikus, ‘This is Vulkan’s hold and thus ours by right.’

Gallikus returned his helm, suggesting the conversation was at an end. ‘I understand, but this materiel is needed. For the mission.’

‘What mission?’

Gallikus turned to follow the others. ‘To find and kill him, of course.’

Servitors and menials carrying the stamp of Iron Hands had begun to flood the approach corridor, here to denude the vault, Obek had no doubt.

‘Kill whom?’ he asked, and Gallikus paused to answer before carrying on his way.

‘The Warmaster Horus.’

EIGHTEEN

Obstinance

The Unscarred were ferried to the *Obstinate* aboard a pair of Iron Hands Thunderhawks. So few Salamanders legionaries were left from the original landing party that they could have fitted aboard a single gunship, but the one they knew as Morikan ‘the Silent’ had ensured their diminished number was divided across two. So it was in silence that Obek made the journey to the battle-barge waiting above, unable to say for certain that their situation had improved since being rescued by the Shattered Legions.

Once docked, the Unscarred disembarked into an assembly deck of dark iron populated by servitors and other mechanised serfs. Shadows and the clouds of venting pressure could not hide the other vessels already in dock upon their arrival, Thunderhawks and Caestus assault boats in varying states of readiness and disrepair. Two Stormbirds loomed over the mismatched fleet – one had been stripped for parts that were being used to restore the other.

Industry ran deep within the Iron Tenth and here the machines toiled unceasingly.

‘Not much flesh amongst these Iron Hands,’ remarked Zandu quietly as he crossed the short distance between the two gunships.

Obek clasped his forearm as the two were reunited, nodding to Varr and Phokan but casting a concerned glance at T’kell and Xen.

‘Have you not heard, brother?’ he replied, returning his attention to Zandu. ‘Our saviours think it weak.’

Zandu laughed, precipitating a bout of coughing that left red flecks on the back of his gauntlet. Sobering, he replied, ‘Perhaps they are right.’

‘Are you injured?’

‘No more than anyone here.’

‘Report to the Apothecary once we’re done.’

‘Done with what, Firebearer?’

Obek’s gaze was drawn to the vaults of the immense assembly deck as a great gate began to open that led deeper into the ship. A gauntleted fist had

been emblazoned upon it, a terse and functional piece of artifice that nonetheless suggested who dominated aboard the *Obstinate*.

‘With whatever awaits us beyond those gates.’

The injured were immediately taken away, presumably to the apothecarion. It left only a small cadre of able-bodied Salamanders legionaries who were quickly escorted under guard to a receiving hall.

More dark iron greeted them as they were ushered firmly into a large, austere chamber that had little by way of ornamentation, save the square columns that ran around its periphery and the starkly appointed throne sitting at the far end of the room.

Obek recognised the legionary occupying it from his facial augmetics and spiked beard.

‘Ulok.’

Morikan the Silent stood at his side, almost disappearing into the shadows.

‘Yes,’ said Ahrem Gallikus softly, ‘but he’s going to address his men before he talks to you. I’d advise silence,’ he added, and went to take up a place farther into the chamber, in front of the Salamanders legionaries.

Obek grasped his arm as he passed.

‘Is this it?’ he asked. The chamber had fewer than sixty warriors in it, including the remnants of the Unscarred. ‘Where are the rest of the legionaries who I saw take the Wrought?’

Gallikus looked down at the gauntleted hand on his arm and Obek removed it.

‘At rest,’ he said, before taking up position with the others. He looked askance at Obek, speaking in hushed tones to the legionary alongside him before turning to the one on the throne.

Ulok rose to his feet before he began, holding out his hands to quiet the hubbub of subdued voices.

‘A great victory,’ he said, nodding as he slowly brought his hands together again, ‘and a firm step towards our father’s retribution. For though it was the Phoenician who struck him down, we know whose hand wrought the deed and whose hand must be severed in reply.’ At this remark he held up his own bionic hand, the symbol of his Legion, and clenched it into a fist. ‘He has many names, but we shall know him only as traitor.’

Zandu leaned in to Obek, and whispered, ‘Is this a briefing or a sermon?’

‘Neither,’ Obek replied, his attention on Ulok.

‘His legionaries have been put to flight,’ Ulok continued, ‘relinquishing a great armoury that we shall use to replenish our own war materiel.’ He nodded again, lowering his gaze to his iron hand, and uttered in a quieter voice that still carried, ‘It is much needed.’

Zandu was about to protest, but Obek laid a hand upon his shoulder to stop him. Something about this Ulok suggested it would be unwise to interrupt, even if he had just sanctioned the plundering of Vulkan’s weapons cache.

Ulok raised his eyes again. ‘The Mechanicum adept is within our grasp,’ he declared to the assembly. ‘We have but to–’ He stopped short, having now turned to face Obek and his men. ‘Who are these legionaries in our midst, Gallikus?’ he asked.

Ahrem Gallikus went on bended knee and bowed before answering. ‘Salamanders, Iron Father,’ he replied, ‘or so they claim.’

Zandu exchanged a concerned glance with Obek.

Ulok frowned; at least, the side of his face that was flesh and blood did. ‘I thought they were all dead… apart from Saurian.’

‘We live on,’ said Obek, and stepped forwards, ‘the evidence is before you. I am Captain Rahz Obek of the Unscarred, also called Firebearer.’

Ulok gave a look of indifference. ‘I have met Salamanders before, aboard this very ship. They came seeking an alliance, speaking of the resurrection of their primarch, a claim I *knew* to be false, and tried to kill us. How do I know you are what you say?’

Obek took another step, prompting the Iron Hands legionaries to reach for their weapons. Only Morikan the Silent did not move but he sensed the Raven Guard’s eyes upon him through the lenses of his corvus helm.

‘*See!*’ said Obek, and gestured to his onyx-dark skin and red eyes, ‘the traits of Nocturne.’

‘Those who came aboard this ship looked the same. Behind the subterfuge of their flesh I found a different mark, a serpent beneath, one that had three heads.’ Ulok’s eye narrowed as the focusing rings on his bionic eye adjusted at the same time. ‘What were you doing in the armoury? Where is your ship? Were you stationed there, a garrison?’

‘No,’ said Obek, shaking his head. ‘We had hoped to use the Wrought as a safehold…’ He paused, realising he had divulged too much.

‘For what? Is it in there now?’

‘No, it is still aboard our ship, which we have lost contact with. We are grateful for your help, but need only to be–’

‘What is on your ship?’ Ulok asked coldly. ‘I will not ask again.’

Obek shook his head dismissively. ‘Relics. Artefacts of cultural significance from Nocturne.’

‘What manner of… *relics*?’

‘It is of no concern of yours.’

Ulok smiled. ‘I see,’ he said, and gestured to his warriors. ‘Take them.’

A ring of stout boarding shields with boltguns locked in their firing nooks surrounded the Salamanders, who had barely reached for their weapons.

‘Don’t,’ Gallikus warned them. ‘These legionaries are Medusan Immortals. If you resist, they will kill you.’

‘You should listen to Legionary Gallikus,’ Ulok told Obek and his men.

‘What do we do?’ hissed Zandu.

‘Submit,’ Obek replied, and raised his hands. ‘We can hardly fight them. Even if we survived, it would only confirm what we are not.’ He met Ulok’s gaze but found no malice or self-satisfaction, only the conviction to do what must be done to protect his men and his ship.

‘How long do you intend to hold us?’ asked Obek.

‘Until your true nature can be determined,’ Ulok replied.

‘Find our ship, and you’ll see that for yourself.’

‘I intend to, Captain Obek. I intend to.’

NINETEEN

Ties that bind

He had not always been ‘Saurian’. It was an honorific, although one he had done little to earn, save living when so many others had not. In this way, he had failed in his calling as an Apothecary. On the fields of Isstvan V, his reductor had remained empty, the gene-seed of his brothers left to rot instead of being harvested.

Recruitment to Ulok’s cause had given Saurian purpose, but of late his sense of fulfilment had waned. At first he had been necessary, but now, what with the Revenants… there was precious little use for a field medic.

So when the injured had been brought aboard the *Obstinate* and into his apothecarion, and kindred legionaries also, Saurian had rejoiced and a small part of him had remembered his old name, his old purpose.

‘Hold him…’ he murmured, prompting a medicae-servitor to lock the two cybernetic clamps it had instead of hands over the forearms of the struggling Salamanders legionary.

The warrior had lost both legs, and was badly burned. Pain jerked his body, making treatment difficult. Saurian’s narthecium had seldom seen such use, but it was put to work now as the Apothecary administered a powerful nerve suppressant.

In a few seconds, the struggles ceased as the legionary fell into a sus-an coma. Six of the twelve inductees had already slipped into suspended animation. Saurian would not be surprised if there were more.

One, however, was awake. Unlike the others Saurian had seen, this legionary still had his honour scars. A great many of them, in fact. It was curious. The legionary jerked his head to beckon the Apothecary over.

Leaving the medicae-servitor to its duties, Saurian went to the stricken legionary.

‘Are you in pain, brother? I can ease your suffering if you are.’ He had not meant it to sound like a threat. Perhaps he had been around Ulok too long? No, he had *definitely* been around Ulok too long, but there was nothing to be done about that now. Oaths were sworn, ties that bound him to the *Obstinate*. Saurian was many things, but oathbreaker was not amongst them.

‘I did not mean–’

‘Will he live?’ asked the legionary, croaking each word. He clutched at his throat. ‘What is this? I don’t…’ He trailed off, struggling to speak.

‘You have been unconscious for several weeks, brother.’

The legionary’s eyes widened, his focus suddenly on his surroundings instead of the unarmoured Techmarine lying on the slab across from him with half his head missing, and next to him a body swathed in a mourning shroud, a darkening blood stain around the hole where his chest used to be.

‘Where… am… I?’ Every utterance was a struggle, but delivered with an urgency that took Saurian aback.

‘Do not try to speak, everything will be explained in–’

The legionary gripped the side of the slab and tried to rise. Saurian put a gauntleted hand on his chest to keep him down. ‘Veteran, you are wounded. Stay down.’

He moved fast, even for a warrior of the Legiones Astartes, seizing the Apothecary around the throat.

‘Where am I?’ he asked again, shouting, ‘Tell me!’

Saurian’s gorget protected him, but he felt the grip of those fingers regardless, and heard the slow buckling of metal as it gave against the legionary’s feverish strength. Saurian turned his wrist so he could lean in with his forearm and use the enhanced strength from his war-plate to instantly break the deadlock.

‘Cease your struggling,’ he told the legionary, who still fought. A punch cracked Saurian’s left retinal lens. A table of surgical instruments was upturned as the legionary kicked it.

‘Tell me!’ he roared, his voice a knife-edged rasp.

Saurian hit him hard with a tranquiliser from his narthecium, and the legionary relaxed.

‘A sedative. Mild enough so we can still talk, but so you can’t fight,’ Saurian told him, ignoring the anger in the legionary’s eyes. ‘You are aboard the *Obstinate*, an Iron Hands battle-barge, now in the arsenal of the Shattered Legions and Iron Father Ulok. Look around…’ Saurian gestured to the row of slabs, the two medicae-servitors who had remained intent on their protocols during the entire fracas, the banks of monitors, vials of replacement tissue and organs, the racks of surgical tools and stimulant injectors.

‘You are wounded, brother. This is the ship’s apothecarion.’

The legionary glared, but appeared to relax. He was struggling to speak again, the sedative having impaired his capacity to do so.

Saurian leaned closer, confident of there being no further attacks. The words were faint, but he heard them well enough, not needing to catch the movement of the legionary's eyes as they identified the subject of his question.

'Will he live?'

Saurian stepped back.

The Techmarine on the slab across from the other legionary was T'kell. He was Vulkan's Forgemaster. Everyone in the Legion knew of him.

Even estranged from his brothers, Saurian felt a deep kinship for these warriors, so it was with some bitterness that he could not answer in the affirmative.

'His injuries are severe, worse even than yours.'

The legionary gave a near imperceptible nod of understanding.

'This…' he gestured to an honour scar on his arm, 'and this…' and then another on his shoulder. 'All of it.'

Saurian frowned, and considered his charge might be delirious from pain. 'I do not understand.'

'Unscarred…' said the legionary, gesturing again. 'Unscarred. To honour their… sacrifice.'

'These are your deeds, brother. Why would you–'

The legionary was shaking his head. 'Can't undo what has been done. Just symbolic. I need a different symbol. Brotherhood. Unscarred.'

Saurian nodded slowly. 'As you wish.' The only way to remove an honour scar was to burn it and obscure the carved or seared flesh. As Saurian reach for his tools, the legionary clenched his arm and he realised the administered sedative had been too mild. He was about to increase the dose when the legionary spoke.

'Where are the rest of my brothers?'

Obek sat in darkness, trying to appreciate the solitude. That had proven difficult over the last few days, surrounded as he was by his brothers.

Ulok had sealed them in one of the *Obstinate*'s barrack halls, which appeared curiously sparse considering the size of the ship and the legionary cohort he had seen force the Sons of Horus into a retreat. He had not seen the renegade captain amongst the dead, alongside his torturer, so had to assume that he had escaped and lived. Of the magos, Obek knew nothing.

Ulok had referred to a magos that must surely have been Regulus, but he had seen the creature destroyed.

As well as meditation rooms, the barrack hall also had ablution chambers and a modest training area. Not that many observed their weapon drills, for Ulok had seen them all disarmed of any serious weapons before admittance and subsequent incarceration. A few Drakes practised their pugilism or duelled with the gladius, but most sat in silence and contemplated the failure of their mission.

The *Chalice of Fire* was lost, its artefacts, as well as the battle-brothers aboard, amongst its casualties.

‘Vulkan,’ Obek whispered to the darkness, nursing a phantom pain from his missing forearm, ‘through adversity, grant us forbearance and the will to fight on.’

They had lost much already, and the Unscarred’s fresh purpose had been subverted by circumstance. Obek began to wonder if they were cursed.

The door to the barracks opened with the grinding of some unseen mechanism and through the brief gout of hydraulic pressure release, a squad of shield-bearing Immortals trooped inside. Ahrem Gallikus was at their head and went unhelmed so he could easily be identified.

He saluted. ‘Captain Obek, I would see to that arm now.’

Obek rose to his feet and Phokan stepped forwards, intending to join him when Obek stopped him.

‘See to it that order is maintained in my absence.’

Phokan nodded, but spared a scything glance for Gallikus.

‘I do not believe your warriors like us very much,’ said the Iron Hands legionary as Obek approached.

Obek laughed mirthlessly.

‘Shall we get this over with?’

As soon as they reached the workshop, Gallikus dismissed his entourage.

‘The Iron Father would prefer you attended to at all times when abroad on the *Obstinate*.’

Obek gave a wry snort. ‘Has your Iron Father always been this paranoid?’

Gallikus didn’t answer. Instead he gestured to a metal cradle in the middle of the chamber, around which were arrayed tools and parts for bionics.

‘It’s more commonly used for servitor repairs, but will serve us equally well in this case.’

Hesitating only briefly, Obek climbed into the cradle. He lay supine, his legs and arms supported by a stout metal frame shaped to his body. Flecks of blood and oil dotted the bare metal and a lumen overhead blazed with a fiery intensity in the otherwise gloomy space.

‘Isn’t this usually the province of an Apothecary?’ asked Obek, as Gallikus removed his shoulder guard, greave and the mesh layer beneath his armour.

‘Not for Iron Hands,’ he replied, subconsciously flexing augmetic fingers as he scraped a cleansing unguent across the part of Obek’s severed arm that still remained.

‘Ah, of course. You are supplementing flesh for metal to garner strength… at the loss of the soul.’

Gallikus had brought a radial arm saw into position, poised at the join between Obek’s upper arm and his shoulder.

‘I am no stranger to pain, Gorgon’s son,’ said Obek, ‘but are the nerves not usually numbed before the cut is made?’

‘Apologies, brother. I am used to doing this on servitors.’ He paused, then turned to meet Obek’s gaze. ‘You believe we have no soul?’

‘Your humanity, perhaps. That *is* your creed if taken to the extreme.’

Gallikus stared, for so long that Obek wondered if the Iron Hands legionary had experienced some kind of mental break, before at last he looked away and spoke.

‘Of late, I have considered the meaning of that creed and the nature of our humanity, our souls.’

‘I am no Chaplain, Gallikus,’ said Obek, recognising the turmoil in this legionary but surprised at the sudden candour, ‘but I will listen if you need me to.’

‘Ever humane, the Eighteenth.’

‘I hope to demonstrate we are not the serpents your Iron Father fears we are.’

Gallikus looked back, as if trying to gauge something that Obek could not discern. He suddenly suspected that Saurian could have replaced his severed arm, and that there was more to this meeting than the grafting of a bionic.

‘Ulok will not release your injured, not those who are severely wounded.’

Obek began to rise, anger bunching his fists but Gallikus put his mechanised hand against his chest.

‘I shift this saw and you are carved in half,’ he warned.

Obek snarled, ‘Why am I here? What is the purpose of all this?’

‘To replace your arm.’

‘And the rest?’

Gallikus looked stern but conflicted. His face saddened, rueful as he finally came to a decision.

‘There is no rest. None at all.’

Zandu basked in the heat of the ablution chamber. He let the scalding water hammer his body until it felt like knives hitting his skin. Despite the pain, he stood inside the cleansing block for almost an hour, but found no solace or invigoration. As the skull-headed founts died off to a miserable trickle, steam rising about him in a heady, vaporous cloud, Zandu felt the same as he had done every moment since coming aboard this ship.

Worn. Tired.

Swathes of heat coming off his onyx skin, he reached into his mouth and pulled out a bloody tooth.

That makes four.

When his hair had begun to fall out, he had shaved his scalp to a glabrous sheen with his combat knife. And when Zandu closed his eyes, the burning man returned, as if spurred on by his imminent demise.

‘Leave me…’ he whispered, but to no avail.

He had heard of Destroyers succumbing to the radiation poisoning of their weaponry, but this had been an intense bombardment of his cells over a prolonged period. His malfunctioning power armour, its hermetic seals broken, had effectively determined his fate.

Ignominious death, and the dread that even those who knew no fear could experience. Perhaps it was as the burning man foretold, a slow wasting, but by fire within even as the fire without raged against it.

Zandu released a long, pained breath and left the cleansing block. Serfs afforded to the Drakes by Ulok stood ready to receive and armour him, their eyes lowered in deference. He let them work, lost in his thoughts as they went about their solemn labours.

He knew he must finally speak with Captain Obek. Several weeks had passed aboard the *Obstinate* with still no sign of the *Chalice of Fire*. At first, he refused to believe that Zau’ull, Krask and the others had perished, that the relics of the primarch had been lost with the ship, but days on end without news had begun to grind him down. And this sickness… it only prolonged the slow agony.

They had to get off this ship, escape and seek out the *Chalice of Fire* for themselves, or die in the attempt. He supposed that was selfish, given his probable fate, but rather death in the service of duty and honour than waste away like a shadow before the onset of the sun.

‘You’re dying,’ said Varr.

Zandu, now armoured but not having heard the intrusion, looked askance at the other legionary as he emerged into the light of an auto-sconce.

‘What did you say to me, Drake?’ He had not meant to vent his anger, but the nerve was yet raw.

‘I said *dying*, not deaf,’ Varr replied.

He too wore his war-plate. Zandu saw the scorched metal had seams of soot like black veins tarnishing the green, and would never be wholly cleansed again. The imagery felt apt as he considered the plight of the Unscarred and his own inevitable demise.

‘I suppose Vulkan calls me to the mountain, does he?’ said Zandu, his voice sour and with a bitter edge. He had meant his remarks to be caustic.

‘No,’ said Varr, with a smile that twisted the map of scar tissue colonising his face, ‘the one our father called has already answered.’

Zandu frowned but before he could ask what Varr meant, Obek appeared in the arched entranceway to the ablution chamber. He had Phokan with him, who acted as equerry in Xen’s absence.

‘I need you two with me,’ said Obek. He seemed troubled. Serious. More than usual.

‘Your arm, brother-captain,’ Zandu said, gesturing to the bionic, ‘it looks well–’

‘Ulok has found the ship,’ said Obek, interrupting. ‘The *Chalice* is ours again.’

‘What of our brothers aboard?’

‘Unknown, but apparently contact has been made.’

Zandu had cause to frown again. ‘And yet you still seem uneasy, captain.’

‘I am. The *Obstinate’*s weapon holds are brimming with materiel taken from the Wrought. What do you think the Iron Father will do if he finds what’s aboard the *Chalice of Fire*? You both saw his reaction when we first came aboard this ship. He has incarcerated us for weeks on end with no other pretence than our provenance was believed to be in question. I have severe misgivings about his intent, but with the *Chalice*, Zau’ull and Krask’s Wyverns, our position has improved.’

‘Our position?’ Zandu queried.

‘Firebearer means for us to bloody our blades on the Gorgon’s sons,’ murmured Varr.

‘Only if strictly necessary,’ Obek warned. ‘But I won’t let them keep us from our ship or our mission. The relics are to be found secure harbour, if not in the Wrought then somewhere else. Geryon Deep, perhaps? Ulok is a warmonger and we have no way of knowing what Vulkan’s arsenal can do if it is unleashed. Our ties are bound to this now. I swore an oath – we all did. To T’kell.’

‘If he lives,’ said Zandu.

‘Live or die,’ said Obek, ‘we hold to it. Nothing else matters.’

Varr smiled, though his eyes had a manic faraway look to them. ‘Endurance, the hard path, self-sacrifice… Our father is justly proud.’

The others had no chance to question him. Voices emanated from the main barrack hall.

The Iron Hands had come to escort them to their fate.

TWENTY

For those who are dead

Zau’ull stood before the emitter, Gor’og Krask and one of his Terminators flanking him on either side. The armour of the Terminators was badly scorched and carried several fresh gouges but it had been the difference between life and death as the launch bays were blasted apart.

A retreat had been the appropriate response from Shipmaster Reyne, even if it did rankle with Zau’ull. No legionary would ever run from a fight, especially one recruited to the XVIII, but Reyne had been protecting the *Chalice of Fire* and Zau’ull could not deny the sagacity of that. A short warp jump had taken them to the edge of the system, a chance to lick their wounds and make necessary repairs. The return had been cautious, via the slow burn of plasma engines. The fact that they had encountered an Iron Hands ship had been unexpected.

Zau’ull nodded for the emitter to be engaged and a beam of grainy grey light filtered from the receiver array, in turn projecting the image of a severe-looking veteran with a face half of iron and a glinting bionic in place of one eye. His beard resembled a piece of angular shrapnel and when he spoke his voice resonated with the inhumanity of a machine.

It felt cold on the bridge when compared to the heat of the forges far below but as Zau’ull listened to the words of the holo-cast veteran, who explained how he had taken a band of Salamanders into his custody until the veracity of their identities could be established, the Chaplain found the fire of his anger burning the chill away.

‘A transport is inbound,’ he told the veteran, ‘to escort our brothers back to their Legion.’

He severed the emitter feed as the veteran gave a solemn nod of acquiescence but could not shake his fury or the disquiet he felt.

‘Is that it?’ asked Krask as the light from the emitter faded and the shadows of the bridge reasserted themselves around its command dais. The crew, as well as Shipmaster Reyne, who had listened to the exchange in silence aboard his throne, faded too as the near darkness swallowed them.

Zau’ull’s eyes glowed against the blackness. ‘For now. I will speak with Obek before acting further.’ He called out to Reyne. ‘Shipmaster?’

The answer came swiftly. ‘I cannot be certain, Chaplain.’

Zau’ull still had the case clasped to his belt and his gauntleted fingers glanced against the metal as he reached for spiritual reassurance. ‘It could not be,’ he whispered and left the bridge with Krask, bound for the secondary embarkation deck.

Ulok had consented to the return of their weapons, so a fully armed cadre of Salamanders made ready in one of the *Obstinate’*s arming chambers. Only Obek had been summoned to the assembly hall before both parties would part ways.

The Iron Father was already waiting for him.

‘I offer my sincerest regret at having taken you under guard, but during such fell times as these it is hard to tell friends from enemies.’

Obek nodded, expecting to be met by a cohort of Medusan Immortals but finding the Iron Father alone, though he felt certain that Morikan was lurking somewhere in the shadows.

‘I do not disagree.’

‘Your injured are still in the apothecarion,’ offered Ulok, ‘and you are at liberty to see them, but Saurian has advised against their removal from his ministrations. Unless you have an Apothecary amongst your ranks?’

‘We did. His name was Fai’sho,’ Obek replied, grimly, ‘but he is amongst the dead.’

Ulok nodded, sympathetic. ‘And not the only one, I’m afraid. Not all survived. I am sorry, brother-captain. You have suffered much.’

‘No more than your Legion.’

A dark cast came over the Iron Father’s face, his mouth tightening into a grim line.

‘Though, I would see my stricken brothers,’ said Obek.

‘It shall be done,’ Ulok replied, bowing as if in concession. When he raised his head again, a question lingered in his eye. ‘I have one further ask of you, brother-captain, if you will hear of it?’

‘Very well.’

‘The renegades who attacked you, they are led by an adept of the Mechanicum.’

‘*Led*? I saw a captain amongst their ranks.’

‘Nonetheless, the adept leads them. He goes by the name Regulus, though he has a longer binaric designation you would not understand.’

Obek gritted his teeth, but Ulok seemed not to notice. ‘I encountered him. His bodyguard did this,’ he said, and gestured with the bionic that stood in place of flesh and blood.

‘Regulus is within the Warmaster’s inner circle, and occupies a position of influence aboard his flagship. As a fount of knowledge, he is almost unparalleled, a veritable oracle. I want to extract that knowledge and with it find a way to kill Horus.’

‘One of the renegades, Rayko Solomus, said Horus had already won, that Terra had fallen.’

‘A lie. He was taunting you. The war isn’t over, Obek, but kill the Warmaster and it will be.’

Obek waited for Ulok to laugh, to reveal a further facet of his madness and confess how his words were meant in jest.

‘You are serious,’ he said, eyes wider.

‘Horus is not a god. He can be killed.’

‘Isn’t he? His followers think he does the will of gods. He is still a primarch, the Emperor’s chosen son, by the Throne.’

‘Not any more. I have been hunting Regulus for a long time,’ Ulok told him. ‘It was how we came to that world in the first place. We have been following his trail. Estranged from the Warmaster’s side, from his main fleet, I knew I would get no better chance to capture him.’

Obek frowned. ‘And yet you didn’t. I admit, I thought he was dead. I saw him destroyed.’

‘A version only. He has many, to widen his reach and confuse his foes, but close by there will be a *prime*, his primogenitor vessel. The other renegades will take us to it. Our long-range augurs have been monitoring the planet and detected a ship inbound. The Regulus-prime will be aboard that ship.’

‘If each incarnation is a version of this adept then why not simply take the one at the Wrought? Or send forces to capture it now?’

‘It must be the prime. A facsimile can be abandoned, but if we have the prime there will be nowhere for Regulus to escape to.’

‘And if there is more than one prime, have you considered that?’

‘There is one, and one alone.’

‘This is reckless, Ulok.’

‘No, it is *logical*. It is the only action that makes any sense.’

Obek considered it, wondering if he truly had a choice. Ulok made trusting him very difficult, but Obek could not in good conscience simply deny his request.

‘What is it you ask of us?’

Ulok’s eye narrowed. ‘Your fury, and will to fight until the bitter end, captain. I plan to attack the renegade vessel but need a second force to infiltrate its heart as a larger major assault is taking place.’

‘I have my own mission.’

‘To escort your relics,’ Ulok nodded. ‘The armoury is no longer viable. It has been denuded of worth, a cache I fully intend to share with its rightful Legion, but my warhost also has need of it. Where will you take your relics now?’

Obek had to concede that was a salient question, *the* salient question.

‘There are other Salamanders strongholds, like Geryon Deep, other places the relics can be kept safe.’

‘And are these strongholds nearby? Can you reach them alone in your ship?’ asked Ulok, opening his hands in an expressive gesture. ‘Or would an outrider, a warship with a heavy garrison aboard, enhance your chances of reaching your safehold? I can offer you that.’

‘And compromise your proposed attack on Horus. Geryon Deep is far from Terra.’

‘Join us, Obek. Become a part of the Shattered Legions. You are alone in the void and in need of allies. Join with me, fight for us, and your concerns shall become my concerns and together we will see them done. None could be greater than removing the head of the serpent himself.’ He held out his bionic hand. ‘Join us. At least in the attack on the renegades. Take your vengeance for all you have suffered at their hands, and I shall see your sacred mission fulfilled and the relics you carry escorted to their rightful place. This oath I swear to you.’

A brief silence fell between them as Obek considered his decision. Ulok seemed part logistician, part zealot. It made him unpredictable. His plan to kill Horus was insane. No assassins could get close, no Throne-allied Legion fleet would even dare. Obek could think of only one primarch volatile enough and still allied to the Throne who would be willing to do it, and he was dead. To attempt such a thing, even with the supposed knowledge that Regulus possessed, was suicide, but then he suspected Ulok and his

Shattered Legion brothers had embraced and accepted that fatalistic notion long ago.

But Obek *did* want vengeance and his oath-bound duty was to kill the enemies of the Imperium, and there were none greater than Horus' own Legion.

He firmly clasped the Iron Father's arm in the warrior's grip. Ulok reciprocated and the bond was made.

'We'll help you take the ship and capture the adept. Then I shall hold you to your word about escorting us. I will not agree to the attack on Horus. I cannot. I am still Eighteenth Legion and after my mission is done I plan to return to Nocturne and Prometheus. We can agree on what you need from the Wrought later.'

Ulok nodded agreement. His grip was firm, unyielding, and as he released Obek again, his lips parted in a thin smile.

'Your wounded.'

Obek started, about to pull away, but Ulok held firm for a moment longer.

'I will have a servo-skull direct you to the apothecarion,' said Ulok. 'You still wish to see them, I take it? I won't deny you.'

Ulok released him, and Obek nodded.

He thought of T'kell and of the mission, his brothers aboard the *Chalice of Fire*. Refusing Ulok's request had felt unwise. Honour bound him to the Shattered Legions now, regardless of where it might lead.

'Yes,' he said, and sensed his grip loosening on his own fate and those of his brothers.

Since their meeting in the workshop, Obek had not seen Ahrem Gallikus again. In fact, as he followed a servo-skull to the apothecarion, he did not see another Medusan Immortal or any Iron Hands legionary at all. Regardless, he felt eyes upon him and not from the mechanised drone.

Morikan.

He wants me to know he sees me, thought Obek, but his mind swiftly wandered to Gallikus' cryptic behaviour.

No rest. None at all.

Obek could not discern its meaning and the Medusan had not elaborated further as he affixed the bionic the Salamanders captain now wore in place of his severed arm.

He reached the apothecarion, the servo-skull hovering noisily above the entrance, and he consigned his thoughts on the matter to later consideration.

The apothecarion door slid open with a faint hiss of pressure. Several Drakes awaited him. Not all were alive.

One of the living Drakes stood before him now, his white armour bearing a single shoulder guard but unmistakably draconic in aspect.

‘You are Saurian.’

The apothecary gave the slightest incline of his head.

‘Brother-captain. It is my honour,’ he said. ‘It has been a long time since I met another of my Legion, before…’ he gestured sadly to the fallen Salamanders.

Fai’sho lay beneath a veil, his blood staining the gossamer-like material. He had been stripped of his armour, as had all of the Salamanders legionaries. He was not the only fatality, either. Obek murmured oaths for them all. The rest were unconscious, deep in suspended animation comas and would not soon be roused, but it appeared they would live.

T’kell’s fate was much more uncertain and Obek came to his side last of all.

‘Forgefather…’ he murmured, his gauntleted fingers poised above the wound in the Techmarine’s skull. Now he saw it, Obek realised what T’kell had done, what he had to do. ‘You were purging the infection, ridding yourself of the adept’s influence.’ He gently closed his hand and withdrew it. ‘At such cost…’

Saurian spoke up, intruding on Obek’s reverie.

‘After Isstvan, I had begun to lose hope that I would ever see my Legion again.’

‘None?’ asked Obek, fighting down the pang of regret at the mention of the Dropsite Massacre. ‘Not amongst your Shattered Legions?’

‘We were scattered after the attack. I fled aboard the *Obstinate*, some of my brothers also, but none survived,’ he said, his mood darkening. ‘Since then, we have remained isolated, fighting against the rebels where we can. To gather together… it would only ensure our swift destruction.’

‘I have met others like you, Saurian. Those who had joined the Shattered Legions. A few returned to Nocturne, their tidings grave, I’m afraid.’

‘Of Vulkan?’ Saurian asked, though his tone suggested he knew the answer.

Obek nodded. ‘His body. It has since been returned to Deathfire.’

Saurian looked grave, but he swiftly marshalled his grief.

‘Is that how you also came back to Nocturne? Were you amongst the Isstvan survivors?’

Obek found he could not meet the Apothecary’s gaze. ‘No, that was not our fate. We have been garrisoned at Prometheus, standing watch.’

‘And the burden of that has lain heavy upon you.’

‘It has.’ Obek regarded the prone form of T’kell. ‘It still does.’

‘Rest assured, brother,’ said Saurian softly. ‘They will be well tended to.’

‘I can attest to that.’ Xen emerged into the apothecarion from a meditation cell, still fatigued but greatly recovered. He stood without his armour and his skin glistened like oil, his wounds like tears in the black. But Obek was not looking at his battle wounds.

‘Your honour brands, brother… They are removed.’

Xen bowed his head, but Obek looked to Saurian.

‘At his request.’

‘Unscarred at last,’ said Obek, returning his attention to his vexillary.

‘I am unworthy of them.’

‘You are worthy of my respect,’ Obek replied, clapping Xen on the shoulder. He drew a sword from his scabbard, a green spatha with a serrated blade. ‘And worthier of this than I.’

Xen took the proffered hilt reverently.

‘I am eager to rejoin my brothers, captain, as *Drakos* is to rejoin his.’

‘And you shall, vexillary. They have need of you. Saurian…’ He turned to the Apothecary.

‘The servo-skull that brought you here will take you to an arming chamber. The vexillary’s weapons and repaired war-plate will be there.’

Obek nodded in gratitude. He had judged these legionaries falsely. They were a beaten blade, battered, hard to trust but still true for all of that. He could not explain the shield-bearer’s behaviour, but then there was much about the warriors of the *Obstinate* that was more unconventional than Ahrem Gallikus.

‘We have a… saying,’ he said to the Apothecary. ‘You will not have heard it.’ Obek hoped the words would bring him solace. ‘Vulkan lives.’

Ahrem Gallikus sat alone in the darkness of the reliquary.

It had been a long time since any legionary had been inducted here and those interred had been reduced to wasted flesh on bone, their augmetics removed and repurposed. Amongst the honoured dead, Gallikus found a measure of peace and used the solitude to meditate.

He had almost been too rash in trusting the Drake. He barely knew him, or his warriors, but a faint hope still burned within. He counselled himself caution, knowing the Silent was ever watchful.

His shield stood before him like an unwelcome guest, a symbol of his shame and failure.

Gallikus remembered the *Retiarius* and the World Eaters. He remembered Azoth as he was, a Frater Ferrum who had been reduced to a shield-bearer like him.

Neither of them could have known there was greater dishonour to come.

‘I will end this,’ he whispered to the darkness and to Azoth, his cold bones and those of his brother Revenants by now held in cryostasis until the call to war sounded again.

Ulok had created the chamber aboard the ship. He had unlocked an avenue of proscribed research and turned the Keys of Hel. Few knew the inner workings of the ‘mausoleum’, but Ulok had been forced to confide in a small cadre of iron-brothers to perpetuate its continued function.

It could not simply be deactivated. Numerous safeguards had been put in place to prevent this. Similarly, it had its own power source separate from that of the ship. Gallikus knew of only two ways to effectively sabotage the cryo-vault – destroy the ship or find a servant of the Omnissiah greater than Ulok.

A betrayal. Did its end justify its means, he wondered? Had Horus faced a similar dilemma?

Rising to his feet, Gallikus gripped the breacher shield and slung it onto his arm.

He knew he had no choice.

‘I will end this.’

TWENTY-ONE

The returned

Zandu saw the burning man, and knew it was a portent of his doom. It had come to him invisibly through a broken seal in his armour, not via some spectre or apparition. He had taken to wearing his helm as much as possible, not wishing to alert his brothers to his condition, but as he stood mag-locked to the deck of the Thunderhawk, its presence became stifling.

They were still on the embarkation deck of the *Obstinate*, awaiting sanction to depart. The engines burred hungrily, eager to be unleashed, and sent vibrations through the fuselage that made Zandu's bones ache. They had taken the dead with them to burn in the pyreums of the *Chalice of Fire* and the caskets lay in rows in the hold, a potent reminder of Zandu's fate.

Through the fog of his weakening senses, he had heard Obek speak to Phokan about the Sons of Horus. Zandu knew some of the renegades had escaped the Wrought during the assault by the Iron Hands and assumed they had been found.

His fingers clenched reflexively at the thought of potential vengeance, and for a brief moment the dull throb in his skull ebbed. He shut his eyes, trying to ward off the pain and fatigue but saw the burning man appear from his subconscious. Emitting a shallow gasp, he opened his eyes again and hoped none had heard him. Weakness would prevent him from joining whatever mission Obek had committed them to and end any chance Zandu might still have of a meaningful death.

Zandu looked up from his thoughts and saw Xen looking back.

He and the vexillary had seldom seen an accord, their philosophies of war too divergent. But the proud swordsman seemed different and nodded to Zandu from across the hold.

He laughed to himself. *Even my mind betrays me…*

'You cannot fight this,' uttered a low voice beside him, the sound of it deadened as if submerged.

'What?' he slurred, and saw Zeb'du Varr.

He too wore his helm, but to hide the scars of his own fiery obsession. It was blackened by fire like the rest of his armour.

‘Your fate. You cannot fight it.’

Zandu’s skull felt like it was under orbital bombardment. His mind swam and he struggled to focus on what Varr was saying.

‘You are mistaken, brother.’ Even his voice sounded different now, filtered through the fog of agony. Zandu fumbled at his helmet clasp in an attempt to remove it and alleviate the heat prickling his face.

‘It won’t help,’ said Varr, the thrumming engine noise masking their conversation from the other Salamanders legionaries in the hold.

‘I am not dying.’

‘All of us are dying, Firefist. Only you have seen the manner of yours.’

Zandu turned, his eyes glowing fiercely as they fell upon Varr. He felt his body tremble, but not from anger.

‘Do not concern yourself,’ Zandu rasped, flecking the inside of his helm with spittle and filling it with the scent of copper.

‘Remember him,’ answered Varr, ‘the burning man.’

Zandu shook his head. It would pass, the pain, the fatigue. It came and went. He tried to fool himself that it was fading now. It wasn’t.

‘No more riddles…’

Varr had lost his mind. He had seen too much, endured too much. Even without being part of the Isstvan massacre, it had stained them all the same.

Unscarred.

Zandu found that wryly amusing.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

And then darkness took him.

Zau’ull stood on the secondary embarkation deck of the *Chalice of Fire* with Krask and his entire squad of Terminators in two ranks behind him. They had been waiting for some time before the klaxons began to sound, signalling the arrival of the ship he had sent for his errant brothers.

Menials and servitors from amongst the reduced deck crews made ready, their vacuum suits proof against the cold void as the embarkation gate levered open to admit the long dark and expose this part of the deck.

Zau’ull looked on through the retinal lenses of his helm, feeling neither the chill of the void nor the drag of venting pressure, as the gunship alighted on a docking station and the embarkation gate slowly closed behind it.

Once the repressurisation indicators turned from crimson to green, the deck crews unhitched the harnesses that had kept them from being swept into the void and rushed to the ship to attend to it.

The rear landing ramp opened amidst this sudden flurry of activity and a solemn procession of Salamanders legionaries filed out, flanking the caskets of the dead.

Zau'ull had his arms crossed over his chest and his crozius mace clutched in his right hand. When he saw Obek, he nodded and the captain's voice crackled over his private vox-feed.

'*Firefather, it is good to see you again but we have urgent matters to discuss. My quarters.*'

The Iron Hands had done little to soften Obek's demeanour, it seemed. It was only as he noticed the absence of T'kell and Zandu that he realised why.

Zau'ull blink-clicked a vox acknowledgement and dismissed the Terminators.

'Is he dead?' asked the Chaplain.

'He lives,' uttered Obek, his back to Zau'ull as he regarded the gilded drake icon carved into the facing wall of his quarters. The chamber was sparse, with little to distinguish it save for a meditation dais, armoury and the crackle of embers from the firepits delineating the back half of the room.

'Barely,' added the captain, turning to face his Chaplain, who had removed his skull-helm and held it in the crook of his left arm. 'Zandu too. That's why we were late. Rad-poisoning. They are aboard the *Obstinate*.'

'The Iron Hands ship?'

Obek nodded.

'I see. Their Iron Father said they had taken you prisoner?'

'They did, convinced we might be traitors.' Obek shook his head at the thought. 'I swear to you, Zau'ull, I have never seen such desperation and mistrust.'

'These grim, dark times are ripe with it.'

Obek nodded, his thoughts distant for a moment as he looked away.

Zau'ull asked, 'The Wrought. What happened?'

'It is overrun, brother. We cannot use it now. That door is closed to us.'

'And the artefacts?'

'Without T'kell, I am without guidance. Vulkan's bidding was to take them to the Wrought and secure them there, but he could not have foreseen this.'

'Perhaps he did,' Zau'ull replied softly. 'Another trial, a means of testing our faith and endurance.' He still had the relic he had taken from the vault

clasped to his belt but he had moved it so the case was hidden by his drake mantle.

‘Then we are failing it,’ Obek replied, looking back to the Chaplain. ‘I have considered Geryon Deep.’

‘At Taras?’ Although he tried, Zau’ull could not keep the look of incredulity off his face.

‘I know, it’s far and the empyrean tides are turbulent.’

‘I would say worse than that, brother-captain.’

Obek pursed his lips, knowing to try for Geryon was a risk.

‘The Iron Father has vouched for our safe passage.’

‘And you trust him?’

‘No, but I am between hammer and anvil, and I would rather have his allegiance than his wrath.’

Zau’ull frowned. ‘Do you believe his intentions to be potentially hostile?’

‘I think he has seen too much war, Firefather. His ship, his warriors… The one who did this,’ Obek brandished the bionic in place of his arm, ‘he said something to me, or it felt like he *wanted* to say something. He said Ulok would not release our wounded, but his final words were the most cryptic. He said “No rest. None at all.” I think he was referring to the legionaries aboard the ship.’

‘What of them? I don’t understand, Firebearer.’

‘Cold, Zau’ull, as cold as the metal clad around their bodies. The sons of the Gorgon are stoic, but they have passion. These warriors were like… automata.’

‘This one who confided in you…’

‘Ahrem Gallikus.’

‘Yes, he was not this way?’

Obek shook his head. ‘No, he seemed different. Human. Alive.’

‘Nothing you have said is particularly reassuring, brother,’ Zau’ull admitted.

‘I know. I think he wanted my help.’

‘With what?’

‘I think he intends to betray his Iron Father.’

‘He’s a traitor?’ said Zau’ull, alarmed.

‘No, I believe him to be loyal. Something is wrong on the *Obstinate* and he wants an end to it.’

Zau’ull’s brow furrowed as he weighed everything Obek had just told him.

‘I cannot see the right path in this, Firebearer.’

‘I have forged one anyway.’

Zau’ull’s eyes narrowed. ‘And before I have heard what it is, I am already thinking it is less than favourable.’

‘It is. I have made an alliance and oathed myself to the Iron Father.’

Zau’ull’s silence bade him continue.

Obek told him everything.

TWENTY-TWO

The *Son of Victory*

Although he had been his legionary brother, Vosto Kurnan did not mourn for Rayko Solomus. He hated the torturer, as he hated almost all things, and found himself grinning at the memory of Solomus' demise.

The dead eyes of the servitor reminded him of it, of the Raven slitting Solomus apart, all his arrogance and impudence spilling out red onto the ground at Kurnan's feet. Some of the blood still stained Kurnan's armour and he found the sight of it pleasing.

Let it remind me of the peril of hubris, he thought, and raised his eyes to the figure skulking in darkness at the back of the room. The Mechanicum emissary shrugged on a robe of sable, but before the material slid over his body and gathered like folds of skin upon the floor of the sanctum, something of his true form was revealed, something metal and arachnoid.

Kurnan felt his hatred rekindled. The servitor lying on the ground had been the only one to escape the wrath of the Gorgon's sons. As the remnants of Kurnan's legionaries had taken to the irradiated plains of the nameless world aboard Rhinos and Land Speeders, he had been faced with the ignominy of defeat and considered death in battle preferable to a fighting withdrawal.

But the adept had needed safe passage across the ruined city and as Lupercal's emissary he would not be denied, even by a legionary captain of the Sons of Horus. The ship, *Son of Victory*, a nimble Sword-class frigate that had fought during the Gorro Hollowing as escort for one of the larger warships, had returned in response to a long-range vox hail from the adept's servitor form and confirmed to Kurnan in whom the true power resided.

Though diminutive in size compared to the greater ships of the line in the Warmaster's fleet, the *Son* had been fashioned with resilience in mind, both to external attack and internal incursion. Of its twenty-six thousand crew, several hundred were mortal auxiliaries charged with the ship's defence. Moreover, it carried a modest garrison of legionaries, which Kurnan would have dearly liked to have had at his disposal when the Iron Hands were slaughtering his men.

‘I have limited understanding of human emotion, Kurnan,’ uttered a mechanised voice from the shadows of the sanctum, ‘but even I can tell you are harbouring some anger.’

‘My men are dead, and you had this ship and its warriors waiting in high orbit.’

‘The purpose of my mission was not to preserve the fighting strength of your legionaries, captain. The *Son of Victory* was a contingency, in case of the need for rapid extraction. Its garrison is charged with my defence. They will be needed. Soon.’

Regulus emerged into the wan light of the lumens. He carried his skull-headed staff and only the faintest glow of the adept’s optics penetrated the shadows of his hood. He almost appeared to glide across the floor of the sanctum, the lie only exposed by the faintest scuttling of his many limbs rattling against it.

Kurnan nodded, and smiled ruefully. ‘A ship has appeared on our augur. A battle-barge, no less. We are dead anyway.’

‘I know.’

Kurnan was taken aback. ‘And yet you seem unconcerned.’

‘You will die, captain, but I shall endure. Now I am back aboard the *Son of Victory* and in this body, the machine is infinite. And I am the machine.’

Kurnan drew his sword. ‘I should end you here, where we stand.’

‘I doubt I could stop you, captain. I will be sure to inform the Warmaster of your treachery, though. You value your honour – I have seen you demonstrate this fact many times. I suspect it is why you hated Solomus so much and despised acting as henchman for me. I do not think you would sully it by killing me.’

Kurnan roared in frustration, slamming his blade back into its sheath. ‘We cannot outrun them, we are martially outclassed…’

‘Let them come. They will try to *take* the ship and that is when we shall make them pay for every yard. I will retreat to my inner sanctum. They are coming for me, for the knowledge I possess. Hold them off, as long you can.’

‘To what end?’ growled Kurnan.

‘We cannot prevail here, captain, but I can ensure what I know does not fall into their hands.’

‘I could kill you still and deny them anything.’

‘If I could feel amusement, captain, I suspect I would do so now. My biology, my *life* and its perpetuity have no bearing whatsoever on the data I hold within my core. It endures after death as I endure. It must be purged.’

‘How?’

Regulus returned to the shadows as a small aperture at the back of the sanctum opened, allowing him into its heart. As it closed behind him, the adept gave Kurnan a final imperative.

‘That is my concern, captain. You have but to seek a worthy death.’

TWENTY-THREE

The burning men

Obek had returned to the *Obstinate* and stood in the darkness of the ship's teleportarium.

Corposant trailed across three metal limbs that arched over the expansive dais of the teleportation array and cast flickering illumination into the large chamber. As well as Obek and his honour guard, it revealed Ulok and a cohort of Medusan Immortals. At the chamber's periphery stood Ahrem Gallikus. He looked on pensively, not a part of Ulok's breacher squad, and at a signal from the Iron Father did not linger.

'Second Revenant cohort,' said Ulok without bothering to look behind him.

Gallikus nodded, and left the chamber.

Morikan the Silent was apparently absent too, but then he might still have been watching unseen. Obek had seldom seen the Iron Father without his 'shadow'.

The rest of the Shattered Legions were engaged in a direct assault on the *Son of Victory*.

Twelve Caestus assault rams had deployed in a wide dispersal across the length of the frigate, the Iron Hands legionaries on board targeting the ship's bridge, weapon decks and other strategically valuable locations. They would maintain pressure on the *Son*'s defenders whilst a smaller cadre, consisting of Gor'og Krask's Terminators, would seek out the adept. Ulok had theorised that Regulus would have embedded his sanctum deep in the heart of the vessel and on one of the lower decks near the enginarium. A drop pod assault against this area of the ship had commenced after the main assault was under way.

A continuous situational report broadcast over the vox, unheeded by the servitors and menials busying themselves with the array's preparation and function, but listened to intently by Obek and Ulok. Its crackling refrain echoed in the large chamber and brought news that Krask had gained the lower enginarium deck.

‘*Encountering resistance,*’ Krask’s voice reverberated over the vox. The crack of weapons discharge undercut it. To Obek’s ears, it sounded like las and solid shot. Armsmen.

A roar of bolter fire overwhelmed the vox, so intense it cut out. It returned a few seconds later with only Krask’s voice and the droning undercurrent of the ship’s engines on the feed.

‘*Neutralised.*’

A ship schematic displayed via hololith provided positional data on the Firedrakes. Krask and his squad were making steady progress from their original point of ingress and navigating across the enginarium deck to a major nexus that hopefully led to the inner core of the ship.

‘The sanctum will be near,’ said Ulok, coldly regarding the schematic and the flashing icon that represented the Salamanders. ‘Engage the homer as soon as you are across its threshold.’

‘*Affirmative… Engaging.*’

Another slew of bolter fire sounded across the vox, a cacophony of muzzle flare and muffled detonations so loud it bordered on white noise. An answering salvo came in its wake.

‘*Renegades sighted! Sons of Horus!*’

Obek gripped the haft of his sheathed gladius all the tighter, reacting to Krask’s warning.

‘*Taking heavy fire.*’

The vox cut out again, unable to cope with the intense auditory returns. It took longer to re-establish this time. After a tense interruption of almost a minute, the vox came back in screaming fury. A deadly firefight had erupted as entrenched renegade defenders took on Krask’s Terminators. No sterner protection existed for a Zone Mortalis engagement than Tactical Dreadnought Armour. In the grim confines of a shipboard assault, its heavy plating and potent weapon systems could tear apart bulkheads and defences, whilst weathering almost anything levelled against it.

Yet it was not inviolable.

The defenders of the *Son of Victory* hunkered behind raised automated barricades as a pair of rapier destroyers enfiladed down the corridor. Krask reflected that the renegades must have purposefully deployed at a cross-junction with a sealed bulkhead at their backs, seemingly confident in their ability to hold this crucial nexus of interlinking corridors. Steam flooded the narrow space from ruptured heating vents and the smoke from over a dozen

deck fires funnelled down to it through atmospheric turbines. Again, this was by design and intended to foul autosenses.

Krask fought through a miasma, braced behind a dragonscale storm shield in the Firedrake vanguard as the Sons of Horus unleashed their heavy weapons. It was like advancing into a hurricane, hammered by las-beams and staggered by incendiaries. A wash of flame spewed into his midst, surging hungrily around the Drakes, intended to blind and disorientate.

Krask held fast behind his shield, roaring down the vox at his brothers to do the same. The first five legionaries in the ranks were shield-bearers, their blunt assault designed to stun an enemy formation and leave it crippled and reeling, for the second half to finish off with combi-bolters and chainfists. Its configuration was versatile and powerful, and more than enough to overwhelm whatever came the Firedrakes' way. It was not infallible, though.

Rath stumbled, losing his bearings for an instant before a rapier's lascannon cored through his exposed chest. The beam struck him high, shearing through hardened adamantium and ceramite. It broke the aegis of Rath's armour, severing through the mesh and fibre bundles in his arm, and then took off the limb at the shoulder in a welter of sparks and blood. Rath's storm shield struck the deck with a barely audible but ominous resonation. A second beam hit his solar plexus, cutting his bellow of defiance short and burning a crater through his torso that speared all the way through his back.

'Forward!' roared Krask. The lascannons would be charging for another salvo. 'We are the favoured of Vulkan!'

Ba'durak took Rath's place in the vanguard, locking shields with Krask, who had resumed a dogged advance into the teeth of the guns. Together, they marched in lockstep, yard by bitter yard and slowly, inexorably increased their pace. The rank of shields behind them did the same until the Drakes had overcome the considerable inertia exerted by their armour and charged.

'Slay them!' roared Krask, as he bulled through a barricade, smashing it apart with his hammer, *Cragfell*. It had been master-crafted by his own hand, an artisan weapon with a heavier head than an ordinary thunder hammer and a longer haft. Only Krask could wield it with a storm shield. He battered one renegade, smashing the shoulder and hearing bone crack. A second he rammed in the throat with the shield's scalloped edge, cutting off the legionary's head. It made enough room to swing *Cragfell*, which tore the defenders off their feet as it obliterated power armour.

Ba’durak and the other two shield-bearers laid in with their own hammers, the energy discharge from every blow lighting up the gloom in destructive monochrome.

As they bludgeoned the defenders, Krask signalled for the second half of his squad to move in.

‘Take the bulkhead,’ he ordered calmly as he speared a prone legionary through the chest with *Cragfell’*s fang-pommel.

As his brothers’ chainfists began to tear up the solid bulkhead, a second tranche of defenders entered from the left-facing corridor. Krask and his men were standing in the cross-junction. Three legionaries with combi-bolters prepared to lay down covering fire as a welter of bolt shells careened off the armour and shields of the exposed Firedrakes, but never even acquired targets as a wall section farther down the corridor blew in, bringing smoke, fire and a storm of plascrete.

Through the ragged breach came a squad of Medusan Immortals.

‘Hold fire,’ Krask warned, not wishing to hit the Iron Hands legionaries. They needed to push on; the bulkhead was about to yield, but the Firedrake Master could only watch in rapt fascination as the Immortals went about their gory task in utter silence.

No war cries escaped their lips, no shouts or roars of pain or anger. They appeared implacable, redoubtable, but without true animus. The Sons of Horus had quickly regrouped and retaliated hard. A spear of burning promethium struck the Iron Hands legionaries, breaking against their shields and taking hold of their armour. The flamer-bearer maintained the pressure, and soon the entire first rank of Immortals was utterly consumed.

Tanks spent, the flamer-bearer stepped back, but as the fire died down, Krask saw the Immortals still advancing with their bodies ablaze. No screams, just a cold determination to kill their enemies. A close range volkite burst seared off an Immortal’s arm and half of his face, but he did not cry out and kept on coming. A second was impaled on a power sword, the crackling blade thrust two-handed by its wielder as one of his battle-brothers rammed a chainsword downwards into the Immortal’s chest. It did not yield and no sound betrayed its certain agony.

Methodically, inexorably, the Immortals took the renegades apart. As the bulkhead preventing further encroachment into the ship finally came down, Krask was left with the image of the Iron Hands legionaries bludgeoning the last of the renegades with mauls and the stocks of their bolters.

He felt no aggression from them as he departed, no emotion at all, just a host of burning men putting others to the sword without vengeance and bereft of satisfaction of any kind.

‘Brothers, well met!’ he cried to them, raising his thunder hammer in salute.

None replied; none even acknowledged the gesture. They simply turned their backs and walked on.

‘Master Krask…’ It was Ba’durak, come to summon his leader.

Krask’s war-helm hid his disquiet, and he gave a shallow nod.

‘Onward,’ he uttered, his voice betraying his feelings. ‘Into the breach and off this ship as soon as we are able.’ As he pushed through to the vanguard, he raised his hammer again. ‘Favoured of Vulkan!’

His brothers echoed him, but the sound of their affirmation did not allay the unease he had felt.

Kurnan knew it would end soon. He had sharpened his blade and cleansed it of grime. He left Solomus’ blood on his armour as a grim reminder of fate. Vox reports from throughout the ship filtered through to his war-helm. Almost every deck was overrun. The bridge had fallen. Every weapon the *Son of Victory* had in its modest arsenal had been silenced.

Nine legionaries, chosen by Kurnan, stood with him. Each was a veteran and their blades crackled as they were drawn, much like Kurnan’s. Each had removed their weapons belts and left them discarded in one corner of the outer sanctum.

Here is honour, thought Kurnan. Cthonia had a barbaric culture, but amidst its slums the ganglords knew what honour meant, even if the form they knew was vicious and cruel.

The door to the outer sanctum remained closed, but Kurnan had not sealed it. He was not hiding nor trying to prolong his life. He merely waited for his death to come and find him.

I am here, he said to himself, and found the hatred that had lain so heavy upon his shoulders begin to ease.

The adept had told him to seek out a worthy death, and only as the sanctum door began to rise did he learn *how* worthy.

As the aperture widened and his foes became known, Kurnan smiled and knew it would be most worthy.

A few minutes dwelling in the darkness of the mausoleum and Gallikus’ armour had already gained a rime of frost. As he pressed deeper into the

chamber, the thin white veneer of it fractured and came apart. The air ghosted around the heat sinks of his generator and respirator grille.

He found Azoth still in his casket, not amongst those chosen to assault the renegade ship, although a great many of the cryostasis vaults were empty and thickened the already nitrogen-rich air with the overbleed from their disengaged immersion pipes.

‘Brother…’ He uttered the word solemnly, sadly, as he placed a gauntleted hand upon the obscured glass of Azoth’s casket. A bio-scanner betrayed the life signs of the ostensible corpse within, but it was not true anima. It had not been Azoth for a long time, not since the *Retiarius*.

‘You died there,’ whispered Gallikus, and bowed his head in shame. ‘I will help you die again. I vow this. My oath.’

Some of the frost had retreated against the heat of Gallikus’ gauntlet, and as he raised his eyes again he saw the face of his former brother through the narrow aperture he had just created.

Though his was fraught with emotion behind the faceplate of his war-helm, Azoth wore a different mask. It spoke of endless winters and grey, chill earth. A tomb-like silence descended, undercut by the dulcet thrum of the active cryostasis vaults.

Gallikus said nothing, and only turned and left the mausoleum behind.

As he was leaving the chamber, he activated his helmet vox.

‘Saurian,’ he uttered, ‘this ends. Now.’

He found the Apothecary waiting for him, unarmed and submissive.

The badly injured Salamanders legionaries were still prone upon their medi-slabs, though Gallikus saw one was absent.

‘Who did you send?’

‘The rad victim. Ulok wanted to see the effects of the process on him.’

‘With Morikan?’

‘Yes, he took the Salamander with him.’

Gallikus muttered, ‘Of course he did.’

‘The others are to be awakened soon,’ the Apothecary said, hesitating, ‘including Azoth.’

Gallikus shook his head. ‘How many of us are left, Saurian? How many true legionaries? No more than a handful. Ulok prefers slaves to brothers.’

Saurian bowed his head sadly and was about to return to his work when Gallikus’ voice stopped him.

‘No,’ he said calmly.

Saurian frowned. ‘It is our duty.’

‘No.’

‘We cannot–’

Since visiting the mausoleum, Gallikus had removed his helm and it hung from his belt, so when he snarled and advanced upon him, Saurian could see his fury.

‘No more!’ he said, seizing the Apothecary by the throat. ‘This wretchedness ends.’

Saurian allowed Gallikus’ wrath, not struggling, and after a few moments was released.

‘Morikan is not here to see *his* will done any more,’ murmured Gallikus as he regarded the bio-signs of the wounded.

Saurian grimaced, rubbing his injured throat.

‘It is betrayal, iron-brother.’

Gallikus turned and said in a soft voice, ‘And what we have allowed already is not?’

The Apothecary’s silence told him there was no argument.

‘Beyond waking the Revenants–’

Gallikus’ attention had returned to the wounded but he warned, ‘Do not sully them with that name.’

Saurian nodded. ‘Beyond waking our fallen brothers, to do anything more… Only the Iron Father can use the vault.’

‘That has been so,’ agreed Gallikus, as he approached one medi-slab in particular, ‘until now. I spoke to their captain. I trust the Drakes. I trust *him*.’

The Techmarine still slept in suspended animation, but his bio-signs appeared stable and the burn damage that had melted the augmetic part of his cranium had begun to heal.

‘That is Forgemaster T’kell,’ uttered Saurian, ‘I cannot just–’

‘Wake him, brother.’

‘His injuries, he may not yet–’

Gallikus was about to take a step towards the Apothecary when he felt something seize his wrist and looked down to see a hand.

‘Where is Obek?’ T’kell demanded. ‘Where are my legionary brothers?’

TWENTY-FOUR

Will of iron

Krask's voice came over the teleportarium vox, thready and breathless.

'*We have gained the sanctum…*'

Ulok mounted one hemisphere of the dais with his Immortals. Obek, Xen and a veteran honour guard from the Unscarred took the other.

A last broadcast emanated from the vox.

'*Teleport homer engaged*,' said Krask.

Ulok gave the signal, and a storm lit up the chamber.

The war party emerged in a maelstrom of light and aetheric wind. As the actinic glare faded, a host of warriors appeared in its wake, trailing corposant from their armour. They were standing on the deck of a warship, amidst the aftermath of a fierce battle. The overhead lume-strips flickered, most having been torn down from their housings, giving the scene an eerie sense of desolation. Bodies lay slumped against the walls. Some had died face down, their blood seeping through the mesh beneath. One appeared to have died on his feet, impaled by a broken power sword that transfixed him to a wall.

One side stood battered but defiant. They wore green, though their Terminator armour was war-torn and scratched to bare gunmetal in places.

'You look bloodied, Wyvern,' said Obek, his gaze straying to the dead renegades but lingering on the two Firedrake bodies beside them.

'We have been, and sustained losses, but fared better than the traitors.' Krask had deep gouges in his war-plate, and parts of it were seared black from the touch of a power blade.

'Hard fought, brother,' said Xen, and nodded to the giant Terminator.

Beyond the chamber where Krask and his men were standing, there was another, smaller room.

Ulok had advanced to this inner sanctum and as Obek caught up to him, he saw the Iron Father facing the Mechanicum adept. Regulus looked much as he had in the tunnels, but appeared to offer no resistance. He merely stood and awaited his fate.

'Has your search proven costly, Iron Father?' asked the adept, his voice as metallic as Ulok's face. 'Am I to render my secrets to you now?'

Ulok drew a plasma pistol. In the other hand, he carried a cog-toothed axe of gunmetal black. The clenched gauntlet of his Legion had been emblazoned on the blade in raised relief.

‘I am not an emotional being,’ he said, ‘but know this will bring me great satisfaction.’

He fired the plasma pistol, the weapon emitting a shriek of energy discharge as it cored through the adept’s torso, setting his robes alight. Ulok let him burn for a few seconds before firing again.

After the fourth shot almost nothing remained of Regulus, save a few scraps of burned sable and the twisted metal leavings that had been his body. Coldly, Ulok approached what was left of the adept’s head, crushing the malformed skull and bionic, and the little organic matter he had still possessed, into sticky remains.

‘Iron Father…’ Obek ventured at the threshold of the inner sanctum and watched in stunned fascination. Xen had half drawn *Ignus* but Obek gestured for calm. ‘You said you wanted to capture him.’

‘I did, *once*,’ Ulok replied. His back was to them, but his cohort of Immortals faced the Salamanders legionaries and had drawn up around the Iron Father.

‘Something changed?’ asked Obek, aware of his honour guard closing around him and Krask’s presence nearby, but also of a large body of warriors coming towards them. He doubted they were renegades.

Ulok turned, his eyes dark as knapped flint. Even his bionic had dimmed to a glowering ember in its mechanical socket.

‘Do you know how those versed in the ways of the Omnissiah communicate?’

‘What is this, Ulok?’ Obek would have reached for his pistol but for the firing squad of bolters arrayed before him.

‘An answer, Drake?’

Krask and his Firedrakes had advanced so they were behind the captain and his honour guard. Obek could heard the humming disruption fields of their wargear. He also heard the tramp of many booted feet closing, so chose to answer.

‘Binaric.’

Ulok gave a humourless smile, and nodded. ‘Data *flows*. It is lighter than an atmosphere and even the hull of a warship is no impediment to its passage. I *learned* something from the traitor’s data-screed. A mote of

knowledge, just a mote, and it confirmed all of my suspicions about you. Your vessel, what is its cargo?'

A deep pit opened in Obek's gut and his bionic arm suddenly felt like a foreign invader. The grip of his flesh-and-blood hand tightened around the haft of his sword. Xen, Phokan and the honour guard tensed but gave way to the Firedrakes as they edged in front of them and to their captain's side.

'Relics, Iron Father.'

'I believe you. Forged by Vulkan's hand, yes? *Weapons*. Peerless weapons,' said Ulok and his eyes flashed hungrily. 'I have need of them. This crusade has need of them.'

'What crusade?' said Obek, as his lip curled in distaste. 'The Crusade has ended.'

'The crusade of vengeance,' Ulok said as if this were obvious. 'For the Gorgon. He decrees it. Your arsenal was gratefully received, but I shall have more.'

Obek slowly shook his head. 'I won't yield the *Chalice of Fire* to you, Ulok. That is what my father decrees. Those weapons are not yours or mine to wield.'

'Forged by a primarch's hand, how can we not? It is our duty.' His teeth clenched at this impassioned outpouring. 'Does vengeance not call to you Drakes as it does to us? We Iron Hands are cold,' he nodded, 'and driven by a vein of logic, but we are angered by the traitor's deceit and all it has cost us. You are fireborn – how is it you can temper your wrath? When you saw your father slain on the black sand, did you not yearn for retribution?'

Obek felt the shame and regret of his retinue in every clenched fist and tightened jaw.

'We did not fight at Isstvan.'

The coldness in Ulok returned in both his eyes and his manner. 'No, you did not. You did not bleed as we bled, or as your braver kin bled.'

Xen cursed. Obek heard it from somewhere behind him and willed his vexillary not to act rashly.

'Whatever you are contemplating, Ulok, do not do it,' said Obek.

'Are you threatening me, Salamander? Are you willing to turn your guns on your allies but not unleash the war forge of your primarch on the enemy?'

'I am *pleading*, Ulok. Do. Not. Do. This.'

Ulok whispered, '*Morikan.*.. It is already done. Remember,' he warned, 'you wrought this upon yourselves.'

The Immortals stepped forwards to fire as Krask and Ba’durak moved up with their storm shields to protect Obek. As the hail of shell impacted explosively against augmented dragonscale, the other Firedrakes unleashed a salvo from their combi-bolters, felling two of the Immortals before the door to the inner sanctum slammed shut to divide them.

‘Firebearer, are you injured?’ asked Krask, eyes front, looking over the edge of his shield, but the door to the inner sanctum stayed sealed.

‘No more than I already was,’ Obek replied. ‘Our Chaplain awaits us on the *Chalice of Fire*. He will have need of us.’

Krask nodded, lowering his guard. ‘The ship’s teleportarium is close.’

TWENTY-FIVE

Faith in fire

A deep wound had been torn in the *Chalice of Fire* and though it had been sealed off and the deck made safe, it remained a chink in a flank of otherwise sturdy armour.

It had not been Ulok's intent to make such a breach when he unleashed the *Obstinate'*s guns; he had wanted Regulus to himself and would countenance no others reaching the adept and either capturing or killing him. All of this was now immaterial as a new obsession had usurped the old, and violent providence had provided a way to realise it.

A solitary gunship ghosted in through the ragged aperture, its lamps dulled, its engine near silent and every inch of it undetectable by augur or sensorium of any kind. Stealth had ever been the most formidable weapon of the XIX. It had not availed them on Isstvan V, for there can be no subtlety in a massacre, but the Raven Guard well knew its value all the same and had honed it to the fine edge of an assassin's knife after their near annihilation.

Since then the art of the unseen had come to represent something else, something more instinctual. Survival.

The lone son of Corax aboard knew about survival, for he had attended the massacre which had claimed not only his voice but so many of his brothers and their allies. What had begun as a righteous endeavour to bring an errant primarch to heel, *the* primarch, had turned into something much uglier and more desperate. As the first barrage of bombs came hurtling down, many had believed it to be a mistake, even though such errors amongst the Legiones Astartes were inconceivable. Even with bodies flying through the smoke-choked air, their limbs and heads missing, some still clung to the lie that it had been unintended. When the legionaries who were meant to reinforce the Raven Guard and their allies turned their guns, then everyone knew the truth.

Some railed, shouting their defiance. They died quickly and unheroically, blown apart or hacked down with their curses left unspoken. Others attempted to fight back, as if they still had a chance of victory. These were the Drakes. They lasted longer, but died all the same. The Gorgon's sons

fought for vengeance, with indignation in their hearts. They fell alongside the headless corpse of their father as another lie was exposed with the mortality of primarchs. Most fled, realising the cause lost and their oaths from others betrayed. The son of Corax had been such a legionary.

Not out of fear, for such concerns were beyond him, but from the very instinct he had clung to ever since. Survival. To live and take revenge.

An incendiary had killed his captain. It tore up his body and left transhuman offal in its wake. It killed a great many of his brothers too, making a mockery of armour and physiologies designed to withstand war. The second explosion, when it came, detonated so close that he was ripped bodily into the air, and so loud that it robbed his dying brothers of their voices. Their screams became noiseless, their shouts angry, silent imprecations.

He had become silent then. If his defiance could not be heard, then he would not voice it. No sound of agony would pass his lips either, a small thing that he could deny his erstwhile allies.

And in his flight, clambering through wreckage and across burning and dismembered bodies, inured to the horror of it all, a paradigm began to form. Gone was brotherhood and fraternity. Survival and fatalism replaced it. To live and take revenge.

Only this and nothing more.

The gunship touched down amidst a clutter of wreckage in the night-black landing bay. Most of the detritus from the attack that had ripped out much of the embarkation deck had either been removed or wrenched into the void, but some still drifted languidly in the airless space.

A ramp opened silently at the front of the ship and the Raven Guard stepped out, again silent. Like the cavernous chamber, he too was night-black and blended so seamlessly as to be almost invisible. Only the faintest glow of his retinal lenses as he analysed the atmospheric conditions of the embarkation deck betrayed his position.

The son of Corax drew his sword. It had a sickle edge, a falchion, and had been forged of monomolecular plasteel. When activated, the sword would vibrate so rapidly and infinitesimally as for the motion to be nearly imperceptible. Its blade reflected no light, and in the shadows it appeared as if it were an extension of his body.

A sealed access hatch, small and nondescript, used for maintenance, led out of the damaged embarkation deck and into a conduit that would allow

further ingress into the ship.

As the Raven Guard headed towards it, he listened keenly over the vox for a command. His name.

And soon enough, he heard it.

‘Morikan.’

Zau’ull knelt in solemn reverie by the vault. It had been left in the secured dock since their departure from Prometheus and though the room was sealed at either end behind a reinforced adamantium gate, exhaust vents from the forges below bled in heat and the tang of cinder. Smoke clouded the air, but only thinly. The heady atmosphere bordered on volcanic, nothing less than a balm to a warrior of Nocturne.

And for a time, Zau’ull basked in it.

Obek had asked him to remain on board the *Chalice of Fire* to protect the artefacts. A pity, the Chaplain reflected, that he had not been asked to wait alone.

‘I am damaged, Firefather,’ a voice said from behind him, and Zau’ull sighed as he opened his eyes.

‘No more than any of us,’ he lied.

Zeb’du Varr may have been referring to his burns and the scarification that ravaged his body, or his mind. Before T’kell had rallied the Unscarred to fulfill his last mission for Vulkan, Varr had sought out the reliquary often. He spoke of how his waking dreams were consumed by fire, that his every thought was obsessed by it. Pyromania, Zau’ull knew, but a profound version of it in which Varr believed he witnessed something in the flames.

‘I have seen things,’ he murmured. ‘In the fire.’

‘Vulkan, yes, you have said before.’

‘You sound as if you do not believe, Chaplain.’

Zau’ull could not be sure that Varr’s reply wasn’t directed at him in a more general way.

‘I believe *you* believe,’ he said, opting for diplomacy.

‘And you do not?’

Zau’ull felt no barb in the question, but the sting of it was acute nonetheless.

‘I do not see what you see, brother.’

‘I see much…’

Zau’ull knew he could regret it, but it was his duty to minister to these warriors and so asked, ‘What have you seen, brother?’

‘I will die here. On this ship.’

‘Our fate was never to survive.’

‘It will be soon…’

His reverie clearly ended, Zau’ull got up and turned to Varr.

‘None of us can know when we will die, brother,’ he said.

‘Zandu sees the burning man.’

Zau’ull nodded, remembering his conversations with Zandu about it. ‘A dream, nothing more. How can you be so certain of your own fate?’

Varr’s smile pulled at the ravaged canvas of his flesh. He was not alone; the last of his warriors were with him but did not trouble the Chaplain as their sergeant did.

‘I see it in the fire,’ said Varr. ‘A trail of smoke moving against the flame.’

Zau’ull had often wondered if a touch of the wyrd did not resonate within Zeb’du Varr. He had never had any Librarius training, as far as Zau’ull knew, and most attributed his odd behaviour to his pyromania. Some, those who knew the old ways of Nocturne, the ones who still knew where to find the nomadic earth-shamans and who had sought their counsel, believed the flame to be alive and that some of its vigour and fury were passed on to those who venerated it.

Though there had not been a fire cult on Nocturne since before Vulkan’s reunion with his father, the beliefs that had once perpetuated them still remained in part. Zau’ull considered Varr might have found such an earth-shaman and looked into the fire too long.

Of course, he could just be insane.

Zau’ull rested his hand upon Varr’s shoulder guard.

‘No fireborn son should fear smoke from any flame, least of all you, Varr.’

The sound of the gate to the secured dock opening made Zau’ull turn. He thought he saw a shadow move against the wall but attributed it to the flicker of an internal lumen.

‘Not a flame,’ uttered Varr, ‘a shadow…’

As the gate began to split along its diagonal, its venting pneumatics clouded the air around it. Zau’ull gripped his crozius mace, but it could be Obek returning. When he saw drake-green armour slowly emerging through the dissipating gas cloud, he frowned.

‘Firefist?’

Zandu had come back to the *Chalice of Fire*. Alone. As he walked towards them, he showed no sign of having heard or understood Zau’ull, his

gaunt and ashen face as expressionless as the dead. Zau'ull went over to him and was about to hail Zandu again, when he realised what Varr had just said. It echoed a word Obek had used before he had left for the *Obstinate*.

He's called the Silent, one of the Raven Guard. He fights like a shadow…

'A shadow–?' he began, remembering the flickering lumen as three feet of monomolecular plasteel impaled his abdomen. The blade came from behind, piercing up through Zau'ull's back and out again, its end a ruby-red speartip.

As the blade was withdrawn, Zau'ull fell forwards onto his hands and knees. Spewing up a gout of blood, he tried to draw his crozius but felt himself impaled a second time.

Zau'ull heard Varr shouting and felt a surge of heat across his face as the shadows retreated into the periphery. His body fought to keep him functioning. His vision blurred but then began to focus again. He got back up. The wound was agony, but kept him conscious. Staggering, he almost fell but struck the side of the vault and stayed upright.

Varr's flamer lay in ruins as he and his warriors fought against the shadow. Morikan the Silent moved so quickly that Zau'ull thought his eyes were fogging again until he realised only the one in black was indistinct.

A Drake fell, slit from groin to sternum, all his insides fleeing his body in a wash of crimson. A second saw his combat blade parried and a length of dark plasteel penetrating his gorget and throat.

Varr and two others remained. As Zandu reached them, Zau'ull held on to a slim hope that he would intervene but he seemed oblivious. Instead, he advanced on the vault and Zau'ull regained his feet to bar the Drake's way.

'Hold,' he warned, aware that he held his crozius in one hand and staunched the wound in his abdomen with the other.

Zandu drew his gladius. It was almost mechanistic, the way he moved, with a coldness that looked alien in a son of Vulkan.

Zau'ull fed a surge of energy through the crozius that crackled along its length. 'You forget yourself, brother. But I will kill you if you step any further.'

Zandu kept going.

A few feet away from him and Zau'ull saw the bionics. Part of Zandu's wrist, one side of his neck. The armour hid the rest.

'You should be dead, brother,' he murmured, and saw Varr in the background, alone and reaching for the ruin of his flamer. Zandu lunged, carving a furrow in Zau'ull's shoulder and tearing up the joint between it and

the torso. Blood gushed from the wound, slicking Zandu's sword but the blow left him exposed to Zau'ull's counter, which struck his plastron and cracked it open.

Zandu staggered, not in pain, if his face was any way to judge, but simply from impact. His chestplate had split, exposing burned and ragged mesh. The flesh beneath had been replaced with metal.

Zau'ull struck again, a laboured and half-parried swing that caved Zandu's left pauldron before he threw the Chaplain aside.

Bones cracked as Zau'ull hit the wall, dropping his crozius. He slumped, his body failing him as he realised he had been stabbed again. He reached for his fallen crozius but his fingers touched the casket mag-locked to his leg instead as Zandu's shadow fell across him.

His hand closing around the casket, Zau'ull knew it would be too late, but before the death blow fell an explosion lit up the dock, erupting into conflagration. The blast threw Zandu against the vault.

Heat prickled the side of Zau'ull's face and a tremor ran through his armour that sent daggers of agony into his raw wounds. He turned, staring into the haze.

Varr lay on his back, burning. The Raven Guard burned too, his armour blasted by Varr's improvised incendiary but holding.

He was laughing, the Drake, and as he died in flames, declared, 'Behold! Behold the burning man!'

Zandu stopped. He had recovered his feet and his gladius scraped the edge of Zau'ull's gorget… Zandu saw the flame. He saw the burning man. The fire had not reached as far as the Armarium but as the flames flickered in his glassy eyes, Zau'ull saw a brief moment of recognition.

Giving a tortured shout, Zandu flung himself at Morikan. Still ablaze, the Silent turned and thrust his sword all the way through Zandu's body until it came out of his back. Thick smoke enveloped them as the fire took hold of both, as two darkened silhouettes of legionaries grappled for supremacy.

Zau'ull broke apart the casket and took out the artefact that had been within.

It resembled a highly ornate stave with a clawed draconic ferule and a drake-skull head, which hid a small emitter in its maw. Energy discharge akin to a disruption field thrummed through its haft from some concomitant power source. It looked ancient, though the design was unmistakably Vulkan's.

Zau’ull grasped it in both hands, for it was a little longer than a gladius and his strength was failing. Zandu had his hands around the Raven Guard’s throat, slowing crushing it, but had sunk to his knees, his armour burning down to bare metal, his blood hissing wildly in the flames. Morikan fought frenziedly, having let go of his sword and now stabbing into Zandu’s flank with a shorter blade.

As the horrendous wounding took its toll, Zandu’s grip loosened, enabling the Raven Guard to free himself. He staggered to his feet, burning brightly and dropping the short blade so he could yank out the falchion from Zandu’s chest and end the fight.

When his eyes met Zau’ull’s and he saw the weapon the Chaplain wielded, Morikan knew it was over.

‘Nothing more…’ he rasped, the first words he had uttered since Isstvan and the last words he would ever speak.

A beam of crimson energy shrieked from the maw of the stave, a song of deep drakes mourning the sundering of the world. Morikan’s already misshapen armour buckled and fragmented before it, cracking and breaking away, first into slivers, then flakes and finally dust. Then came flesh and bone, as centuries of entropy were visited upon him in seconds. The maw widened and so too the beam. It had cored through Morikan’s chest and now it bled across his entire body. Zau’ull clung on, the stave shaking in his grasp as he fought its volatile spirit.

The Raven was no more; only a shadow lingered where once there had been a legionary and so he returned from whence he came.

With great effort, Zau’ull deactivated the stave, understanding now the burden it represented and the reason it must be kept safe. As he sagged back against the wall, the edges of his vision crowded with blackness and he saw Zandu bloodied but at peace and Varr, a rictus grin forever seared upon his dead face.

Before oblivion took him, Zau’ull’s gorget vox crackled to life.

‘*Firefather…*’

It was Obek. His words were urgent, warning about Morikan and filled with determination. Zau’ull let him speak for he had not the strength to interrupt. Instead, when Obek was done and had made his oaths to return with all haste to the *Chalice of Fire*, Zau’ull gave a shuddering breath and just before he passed out, he uttered, ‘Our legacy is safe…’

TWENTY-SIX

Immortals

T’kell looked upon the frozen legionaries and despaired.

‘This is an abomination,’ he said, both to himself and to Gallikus, his breath pluming in the chilling expanse of the cryostasis chamber.

After he had woken, and once Gallikus had told him all that had happened during his suspended animation, T’kell had learned of the vault and the reign of Kastigan Ulok. He knew the Iron Fathers, and had trusted comrades within their ranks. He respected their skill and dedication to the Omnissiah, but what he saw in the so-called ‘mausoleum’ was aberrant in the extreme and a dangerous deviation from the machine creed of Mars.

‘I have seen first hand what lies in the abyss of proscribed mechanistic endeavour.’ He touched his ragged scalp and the metallic part of his cranium blackened by plasma burn. ‘I turned a weapon on myself when I felt my free will slip from my grasp. I purged the ills of malicious code in my system, but this… how can this be purged? How is this any different to what became of me?’

‘It cannot be allowed to endure,’ said Gallikus, his voice solemn.

T’kell turned on him sharply. ‘And yet you have let it.’

The Iron Hands legionary’s gaze fell upon one cryo-casket in particular. ‘To my shame.’

Saurian had stayed behind to minister to the wounded in the apothecarion and prepare them for transport back to the *Chalice of Fire*. Ulok would soon return, his cohorts with him and possibly even the Raven. The madness had to end, and it would cease only one way.

‘You could have destroyed it,’ said T’kell, once again gazing upon the ranks of slumbering warriors.

‘You think I did not consider it,’ answered Gallikus, chagrined, ‘but to breach the armourglass, to even crack it… An incendiary that powerful,’ he shook his head, ‘it would endanger the ship, and I will not raise arms against Ulok. He is wrong but he is still my Iron Father. I won’t betray him further than I must. It has to be done from within by one of your kind.’

‘A Drake?’

‘A Techmarine. I have not the skill,’ admitted Gallikus. He took a knee, head bowed as he leaned upon his shield like a knight of old Terra. ‘Allow my brothers this final dignity, Forgefather. They have served the Throne well beyond their due.’

T’kell nodded, for he could do nothing else but accede to the Iron Hands legionary’s request, and Gallikus arose again.

The ship vox crackled overhead. It was the Apothecary, Saurian.

His words were brief, but fell heavy upon Gallikus as he listened in silence.

‘*Iron-brother… he is back.*’

Gallikus’ face was grim as he cut the vox-feed.

‘Stay here, Forgefather,’ he said, hefting his breacher shield, ‘and bring my brothers peace at last.’ He looked as if he were headed for the gallows, but T’kell now realised he faced a darker fate than even that. Now the Iron Father had returned, Gallikus would have to face him.

‘I need time to deactivate the machine,’ he told the Iron Hands legionary.

‘I shall give you every second my will can afford you.’

He saluted T’kell and donned his war-helm.

‘Immortals no more,’ he muttered softly, casting a final glance at the same cryo-casket before he left the chamber behind.

An infernal heart lay somewhere amidst this place; T’kell could feel the steady pulse of its machine anima and like a Thunder Warrior of old about to raze a temple to forbidden gods, he strode purposefully towards it.

Gallikus met Saurian on his way back from the launch bay.

‘Is it done?’ he asked.

The Salamanders legionary nodded. ‘Released via saviour pod. Every one of them.’ He was armed, a chainaxe and a hand flamer.

‘Are you going to war, drake-brother?’

‘Yes, iron-brother. Alongside you.’

‘Ulok won’t be alone. The Revenants will protect him.’

‘Yes, I expect they will.’

‘And we will likely die.’

‘Then at least I shall die alongside my brother.’

Gallikus nodded, and the two clasped forearms in the warrior’s way before breaking apart again.

‘I will meet him outside the embarkation deck conduit. It’s narrow. I can hold him there a while.’

Saurian donned his helm, a savage piece he seldom wore any more which had a draconic aspect. ‘It felt right once,’ he said, through the fanged respirator grille. ‘A purpose to cling to.’

‘It has run its course, brother. Now you and I must end it.’

‘To see my Legion again, if not whole, but surviving. I am glad of that.’

Gallikus gave no reply. He could claim no such closure. He hefted his shield, turned and headed for the embarkation deck conduit.

TWENTY-SEVEN

A final reckoning

Obek ran all the way from the *Chalice of Fire*'s teleportarium to the secure dock where he knew Zau'ull would be. Only a matter of two decks, it still felt like an age.

He found the Chaplain amidst smoke and still-burning bodies, slumped against the wall. A battle had been fought around the Armarium, a costly one. The dead lay strewn about, all of them Salamanders. Krask and his warriors waited at the entrance, their guard still up.

'Firefather…' uttered Obek.

As he rushed over to Zau'ull, Obek could discern no life signs from him and began to fear the worst. Blood caked the Chaplain's black armour and half of his face had been seared by the heat of the now dying flames.

Obek had seen Zandu, Varr and the last of Varr's squad on the way in, and knew they were all dead. He could not find their killer, though, the Silent Morikan.

Zau'ull's eyes opened a crack and Obek exhaled his relief.

'The Raven, is he here?' Obek had one hand on his sidearm, but Zau'ull shook his head.

It was only then that Obek noticed the drake-head stave still clutched in the Chaplain's grasp.

'Is that…?' he asked, crouching over the Chaplain to check his vitals.

'I am sorry… brother-captain,' said Zau'ull, his voice ragged and failing, 'but I found my faith again. I see Vulkan… not in the flames…' he reached up and held the side of Obek's face, 'but in you.' His eyes, now flickering open and shut, went to Krask who stood solemnly nearby and then to Xen, who looked on stoically. 'In all of us.'

'Don't speak,' Obek told him. 'The Apothecary, he may yet help us.'

Struggling to breathe as his lungs collapsed, Zau'ull shook his head sadly and smiled.

'Our fate was never… to survive.'

His hand fell from Obek's face, and then he was still.

Head bowed, Obek reached up and shut the Chaplain’s eyes. Such a cost, he could never have imagined how severe when they had all sworn their allegiance to the mission in the Igneous Vault back on Prometheus.

‘Firebearer,’ ventured Krask after a few moments of silence. His warriors stood behind him, respectfully observant. ‘What now?’

Obek secured the drake-stave to his own armour; he would return the artefact to the Armarium later, but for now… ‘T’kell is still aboard that ship. We damn well get him back.’

‘The embarkation decks are in ruins, and I doubt the *Obstinate’*s teleportarium will receive us.’

Krask was right, but Obek had another method of incursion in mind. He raised the shipmaster on his vox.

‘Master Reyne.’

‘Aye, my lord,’ came the voice of the old wayfarer across the feed. Renye was of Nocturne and all his years in the Navy could not drum his thick tribal accent from him. ‘What is your bidding?’

‘Bring the *Chalice* in close to the *Obstinate*, within direct boarding action distance.’

Reyne cleared his throat, suddenly anxious. ‘That close. Their weapons, they will tear us open, lord.’

Obek smiled grimly. ‘Ulok won’t fire on us. He still believes he has the upper hand and wants what’s on this ship. Bring us close, just short of ramming them.’

Reyne gave a wary affirmative but went about his duty. In moments the boosted plasma engines of the *Chalice of Fire* could be felt thrumming through the lower decks.

‘We’ll cross the void in our power armour, through the tear in the hull,’ Obek declared to the others.

No one gainsaid him.

Krask grinned ferally. ‘Eye to eye,’ he said.

‘As near as Reyne dares,’ Obek confirmed, and was heading from the secure dock, intent on the mission, when he found Xen in his path.

‘You are wounded, brother-captain. I can see it in the way you move… or don’t move.’

‘So are you, Vexillary.’

Xen sharply drew both swords. *Ignus* and *Drakos* were either side of Obek’s neck before he had a hand on his blade’s hilt.

‘Not as badly as you. Besides,’ he said, politely sheathing his swords, ‘someone must remain behind if this fails. If T’kell does not return, you are custodian of the artefacts.’ And he looked down reverently at the drake-headed stave, a sense of wonderment in his eyes. ‘We should not abandon our mission.’

‘And here I was believing you in search of glory again,’ Obek replied, wryly.

Xen smiled, ‘Who says I am not?’

‘*I* for one,’ said Obek, and laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘Bring back our Forgefather,’ he told him.

‘Vulkan lives,’ said Xen, as he, Krask and the Terminators moved out.

‘Vulkan lives,’ Obek replied as he watched them go.

The blast doors parted, emitting clouds of white gas and the flashing spectrum of the *Obstinate’*s embarkation deck’s warning lamps. Through them stepped Ulok, who looked incredulously at the Immortal standing fifty feet away at the end of the access conduit. The lumens were dimmed and the Iron Father’s bionic eye shone almost malevolently in the darkness.

Only when Ahrem Gallikus raised his power maul in salute did Ulok realise what was actually happening.

Ulok’s face fell, as stern and cold as the metal that had colonised his body.

‘Flesh is weak,’ he said, disappointed, and ordered the Revenants to attack.

The engine at the heart of the cryostasis vault was beyond byzantine. Constructed around a hexagonal core as large as a Contemptor, its cables and pipes extended throughout the hectare-sized chamber to feed every casket. Embedded deep and shrouded in cryogenic mist, it could not be seen from the threshold. Up close it took on a sinister aspect, like a metallic leviathan, its tentacles stretching off into the gloom.

The sheer ranks of frozen legionaries standing in rows was staggering. Though the mist from the cryo-freezing process obscured much, it was obvious to T’kell that there must be hundreds, possibly more. An army, linked by tubes and pipes, their faces locked behind panes of ice. It was cold, and it was metal throughout, a laboratory and not a barracks. A keen mind, but one afflicted by hubris and driven by obsession had created this place. In its raising, T’kell saw everything his Martian masters had warned him about. He saw madness.

Vulkan had taught his sons many things: metal forging, self-sacrifice and nobility. He had wrenched himself from the very brink of self-annihilation. He had also espoused his theology of the Circle of Fire, and though the primarch was now gone, it was this belief that brought hope to many and which T'kell now saw had been thoughtlessly subverted by Iron Father Ulok.

'That which ends, ends, and so returns to the earth,' he intoned, using his plasma cutter to shear open the outer housing of the engine. It took a few minutes, for its carapace was thick, but once through T'kell found the inload ports where he would gain access to the leviathan's core.

'To be born again in the Circle of Fire,' he said, releasing his haptic mechadendrites. 'To be renewed.'

This was not renewal or rebirth; it was stagnation, a cruel and slow decay to oblivion. He could think of no worse fate.

Bracing himself, T'kell used his mechadendrites to interface with the machine. Lancing pain filled his body at the moment of connection, demonstrating how weak he still was. Ulok had prepared defences to his beloved, horrific creation. Paranoid as he obviously was, he had considered another Techmarine or even an adept of the Mechanicum might attempt to destroy the leviathan from within.

Ostensibly it was servos, circuits, processors, but what lay beyond those cold engineered components was something darker. As T'kell engaged with the machine, he encountered complex neuromorphic subroutines embedded within the leviathan's standard operating protocols, placed there to resist his efforts to incite a catastrophic shutdown. An almost abominable intelligence possessed the machine, intent on the foreign invader's expulsion and destruction.

A slabbed road stretched before him, a part of the technoscape, but as real as stone or metal underfoot. He heard his boots echo as he traversed what he knew to be the datastream. The sound resonated, but oddly, hollowly, betraying the fact it was not sound at all but merely code his brain had begun to datasift as one footstep followed another.

At the end of the road lay a gate, as tall as Olympus Mons and rendered in iridescent crystal. And beyond the gate, was the storm.

T'kell could feel it repelling him with its hate and anger. He had breached its cordon and it would kill him for this transgression. As he closed on the gate, T'kell realised he was no longer clad in power armour, but in an

archaic suit of tempered drake hide like a dragonknight of ages past. In his hand, he clutched a lance, seemingly plucked from the air that was not air.

Two columns held the gate in place, and though there was no wall, no barrier either side, T'kell knew he must pass through this portal to confront the machine at the eye of the storm. He broke into a run, his lance held aloft and pointed forwards in the manner of a throwing spear, but as he closed on the gate itself the columns began to turn.

On the sides that had faced directly away from T'kell were carved statues, on each a cyclops wrenched from the days of Terran myth. In a moment of terrifying synchronicity, both creatures opened their eye to behold the interloper.

With a bellow, they stepped forward, leaving the columns behind and shaking the ground with the sheer weight of their tread.

T'kell held firm, undaunted as he charged and felt the lance-tip pierce flesh…

The cyclops roared, its muscular flank impaled by three feet of steel. It bucked and thrashed in its agony, shaking T'kell violently, but he clung on to the haft of his weapon. The second creature tried to grasp him in its meaty hands but, still hanging on to the lance one-handed in mid-air, T'kell drew a sword out of the datastream, its blade blazing with light.

One stroke and the sword parted the cyclops' hand from its wrist. Dark ooze flowed from the stump with a sound like machine static. Shrinking, it sank to its knees and T'kell released his grip on the lance still transfixed in the first creature. As he fell, he gripped his sword two-handed and struck off the head of the diminutive cyclops.

As he turned, the first cyclops freed itself. It snapped the lance in two, and it discorporated into fragments of shattered code. But T'kell didn't need it. He had the blade, and as the creature came for him, its eye alive with vengeance, the sword grew brighter still…

It burned the creature, blinding it before searing the skin from its bones, and soon all that remained was a wire frame that capitulated under the weight of its own broken logic.

The dust of the cyclops' banishment lingered for a few seconds before being swept away, consumed by the voracious datastream feeding the storm.

The gate yawned open as T'kell stood before it.

All that remained was the storm and as he closed upon the threshold, he felt the presence of the machine and saw a lumbering shadow only partially

concealed by the tempest.

He stepped forwards and the storm took him.

He saw the beast, the many-tentacled leviathan, and from its chasmal maw it spat lightning…

Assailed by a barrage of power surges that sought to burn out his nervous system, T'kell held on. Amongst a screed of hostile scrapcode, he searched for the leviathan's cortex and found a determined and hostile defender, a hunter-killer in all but name.

He engaged it. The stench of his burning flesh was repellant, the pain almost unbearable but he held on. Even when his haptic implants fused to the inload ports, he held on.

And when it became too much, he roared.

'Vulkan!'

Smoke was rising from his armour. Heat had seared the joints, but he held on.

The storm beat against him and the lightning hammered his drake-hide armour until it was nothing but a sheath of blackened flesh. T'kell held the blade aloft, its light flickering against the darkness of the leviathan's encroaching tentacles as it sought to smother him.

He cried out, 'Vulkan!' but the word was emitted as a screed of code that fed the flame within the sword and saw it rekindled.

The light grew, as bright as a sun and burning. It earthed the lightning, and took the storm's power and fury for its own. The beast was close – it was all that T'kell could see. A single, glassy eye reared up before him and T'kell saw his fire-ravaged face reflected in it. It was abyssal, abominable, and now it must die.

He forged the blade in his hand into a screed of purifying code and as he roared his defiance at the blackness of the abyss, he thrust…

Gallikus backed up. He was bleeding. One of his retinal lenses had burst and a blood-shot eye stared out through the shattered aperture to regard his enemies.

Enemies… I once called them brothers.

Six of the Revenants were down. They needed to return to cryostasis. They needed the machine.

'They're getting slower…' said Gallikus, slurring his words.

Ulok did not answer. He watched from a short distance away, letting his deathless cohorts do the fighting.

Gallikus smiled bitterly as he raised his battered shield. Four more Revenants came at him.

Behind them, Ulok waited.

T’kell fell to his knees. Thin wisps of vapour trailed upwards from the armour now fused to his stricken body where the heat had begun to melt and evaporate the layer of hoarfrost encasing him.

The leviathan was dead. He had slain it.

Managing to raise his head, T’kell looked upon the caskets and saw that it was done.

The cold, dead eyes staring blankly through rimes of rapidly diminishing frost showed no awareness of their fate, or gratitude at their release, at least not those that T’kell could see.

‘That which ends, ends,’ he said, his voice no louder than a croak, and would have fallen but for the arm around his chest.

‘Brother Drake,’ said Saurian. ‘It seems my arrival is timely. We must get you off this ship.’

With effort, the Apothecary managed to steady T’kell so he would not fall and then told him to turn aside as he severed the mechadendrites linking the Techmarine to the machine. A last stab of agony flared and then dulled as T’kell was released.

‘You have my gratitude…’ he said, breathless.

‘Don’t thank me until you are off the ship. And to that end, I’ll need to give you something so you can walk. The pain will only be momentary.’

Saurian took a vial from his narthecium kit and injected T’kell in the neck. As he was helped to his feet, T’kell found his pain greatly lessened and the fog of his injuries clearing.

‘Stimulant,’ Saurian explained. ‘It will only last for a while. Come.’

He led the Techmarine from the silent cryo-chamber, not sparing so much as a glance at the entombed legionaries, and brought him to an access hatch that was barely large enough to accommodate his armoured bulk.

‘I should let Gallikus know,’ said T’kell.

‘He’ll know,’ said Saurian, and gestured to the access hatch. ‘That conduit will take you all the way down to the launch bays. A ship is already prepared for you. It was done at the same time I sent your brothers.’

T’kell nodded. ‘They are your brothers too, Saurian.’

‘No. I think not. The Legion died on Isstvan V. I saw it perish. I am a ghost, no different to the thawing bodies in that mausoleum we just left.’

‘Then well met, brother,’ T’kell replied. ‘If we make it back to Nocturne, I will see your name is remembered.’

‘I had a name once. I no longer carry it. I am content to be Saurian.’

‘So be it.’ T’kell and Saurian clasped forearms, before he entered the hatch and left the enigmatic Apothecary behind.

The last of the Revenants fell. Gallikus wept with every blow, for it was with both grief and vindication that he ended their suffering.

His shield hung from his arm in pieces and he shrugged it off. His power maul had become little more than a bludgeon.

‘Come then, Iron Father,’ he beckoned, drawing his gladius and extending it wearily in Ulok’s direction, ‘and let my betrayal be done.’

Ulok regarded the defeated warrior and unslung his cog-toothed axe. An energy surge crackled cerulean along the blade’s edge.

‘You will make a worthy Revenant, Ahrem,’ he said coldly. ‘I have always thought so.’

‘Only if you take me alive, Iron Father.’

‘You will live,’ Ulok replied. ‘You will become your namesake and join the immortal ranks. You should feel honoured.’

A host of silent warriors stood in ranks behind him, and Gallikus knew Ulok would not order them to attack. The Iron Father only needed for Gallikus to be worn down, not dead, before he committed him to an existence of eternal servitude.

‘And if there is no casket for me,’ said Gallikus, his feet unsteady, ‘what then?’

Ulok’s eye narrowed, as he realised he had been deceived.

‘What have you done, brother?’

‘It’s not what *I* have done,’ Gallikus replied, before Ulok charged and struck him down.

T’kell emerged onto one of the *Obstinate’*s embarkation decks. Relatively small for such a large vessel, the deck had launch bays and maintenance pits for six gunships, all but one of which were empty. A reserve launch bay for use in extremis, he reasoned.

A lone vessel rested on its landing stanchions, facing one of the aft launch bays. The gate was closed but not sealed. A skeleton deck crew was in attendance, engaged in maintenance. Shrouded lumens gave off little light and T’kell kept to the shadows as he crossed the threshold, but the crewmen paid him no heed and he realised they were all servitors.

Saurian had been as good as his word, and despite his injuries T’kell began to move confidently towards his salvation.

Halfway to the waiting gunship the launch gate icon went from green to red. A door from an upper deck opened and a cohort of twenty Iron Hands legionaries stepped out from a conveyer with bolters trained on the Techmarine.

T’kell stopped, and heard the crackle of the ship’s vox emitting from somewhere in the vaults of the hangar.

A voice he did not recognise echoed mechanically.

‘*Forgemaster T’kell… They have orders to kill you if you attempt to escape*,’ it said. ‘*I am Iron Father Ulok and the* Obstinate *is my ship. Legionary Gallikus is dead. I assume it was he that asked you to sabotage the cryo-genesis chamber. I did not wish to kill him, but he left me no choice.*’ The voice paused, as if debating the next words. ‘*I am honoured to have you aboard, but I will kill you too if you force my hand.*’

The Iron Hands legionaries advanced in lockstep, and T’kell knew by the way they moved that they were Ulok’s creatures, just like those he had seen frozen and entombed.

‘Am I to be your prisoner?’ T’kell asked.

A moment of silence lapsed that seemed to stretch.

‘*Yes. You will assist me in repairing the machine you tried to destroy.*’

‘I cannot,’ said T’kell. ‘I will not.’

‘*You say that*,’ said Ulok, ‘*as if you think you have a choice.*’

The vox-feed cut off abruptly and T’kell was left alone facing the Iron Hands. They weren’t here to kill him. They would have done so already. Ulok had lied about that. They were here to apprehend him. A cryo-chamber must have survived, kept somewhere else aboard the ship and known only to the Iron Father. It was the only reason Ulok would need him to repair the machine.

The vox crackled again, and for a moment T’kell thought Ulok had returned to gloat, but the feed emanated from his gorget.

‘*Forgefather…*’

It was Ak’nun Xen. He was running. In the background, T’kell heard the sound of a blast door being released and the slow churn of its mechanism.

‘Vexillary.’

Still T’kell did not move, still the Iron Hands legionaries advanced. They would be upon him soon.

‘*We are coming for you, we–*’

‘No.’

‘*T’kell we are about to–*’

‘No, brother. It’s too late. Tell Obek to fire upon this ship. I have disengaged its shields but I don’t know for how long.’

‘*We are at the launch bay now.*’

‘It’s too late, Xen. Destroy the ship.’

A few moments passed. Xen would be raising Obek or conferring with Krask, if he yet lived. The Iron Hands legionaries reached him now and T’kell sank to his knees before them, head bowed in submission.

The urgency in Xen’s voice had faded when he replied, turned to resignation. ‘*Forgefather, I…*’

‘Vulkan lives, brother,’ said T’kell, severing the feed.

A gauntleted hand grasped his shoulder, and he closed his eyes.

He was dragged to his feet and marched from the embarkation deck into the conveyor. A few seconds into their ascent, the deck erupted in fire.

T’kell smiled as the flames consumed him, as the Iron Hands burned and the *Obstinate* broke apart.

The Eye of Vulkan had torn a mortal wound that without its shields the *Obstinate* was unable to survive.

Shipmaster Reyne, having drawn up alongside the gargantuan vessel, had no time to withdraw when the immense defence laser had fired. The explosion had gored the *Chalice of Fire* all across its port flank, overwhelming the void shields almost instantaneously and savaging the armour beneath with a storm of debris, but the ship was spared any further collateral damage.

It had near-crippled the vessel, which could only limp away from the site of the *Obstinate’*s destruction under failing reserve power. It had taken days, not hours to get away. They had survived only to be doomed themselves.

The Salamanders had returned to one of the *Chalice’*s forge halls. A solemn brotherhood had gathered there, surrounded by eddies of smoke and tendrils of flame.

T’kell was dead, so too Zau’ull, Zandu, Varr and many more amongst the Unscarred.

The wounded had been saved, those sent by Saurian in the saviour pods, but it was bitter compensation.

Obek stood at the head of the throng. All was darkness and flickering shadow in the obsidian chamber. Gor’og Krask and the Terminators kneeled closest, Xen alongside them, the banner clutched in his left hand. Phokan knelt in front of those Firedrakes in the rear rank.

Fewer than half of those who had begun the mission remained.

Obek had sealed the artefacts, including the one taken by Zau’ull, in the deepest and hottest vault of the ship. It seemed fitting to keep them close to the heart of the forges.

He donned his war-helm and heard the last reports of Shipmaster Reyne as he counted down the seconds of power left in the engines. After that, they would drift with only the fathomless void before them.

‘It is ended,’ he told the Drakes, unscarred no more. ‘And we have found the final rest of our father’s legacy. It is here, with us.’

Though they kneeled, every Salamanders legionary met their captain’s gaze with fiery and stalwart determination. With their dying breaths they would protect the artefacts of Vulkan. They would hold the ship.

Obek looked to Xen, raising his sword. It gleamed in the firelight, polished to a mirror sheen.

‘What is the meaning of sacrifice?’ he asked.

‘To live when others died,’ Xen replied.

‘And what is our purpose?’

‘To be the wardens and protectors,’ answered the throng.

‘And who are we?’

‘Vulkan’s chosen,’ they said as one. ‘Custodians of his legacy.’

The vow had changed, Obek reflected, but their duty had not.

‘Vulkan’s chosen!’ he roared, and the hall shook to the echoes of impassioned affirmation.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Stasis

Obek woke, wiping away the void-frost on his retinal lenses.

He had no idea how long he had been out. His feet were still mag-locked to the floor of the relic hall, his bolter and blade to either thigh.

Disengaging the armour lock, he felt a sudden lightness as the zero gravity leavened his mass. Motes of void-matter floated in the air, shimmering like languid stars in the light of his suit lamps. Bodies floated too, frozen in their death throes.

All was still. His brothers were beside him. He tried to check the status of Zau'ull's casket but the ship's cogitators were offline. Life support, weapons, shields, engines – all had redlined. The navigation cogitator still functioned. Obek accessed it through his helm and brought up their location on his retinal lens.

UNKNOWN…

The data scrolled across his vision in an endless stream of red.

UNKNOWN…
UNKNOWN…
UNKNOWN…
UNKNOWN…
UNKNOWN…
UNKNOWN…
UNKNOWN…
UNKNOWN…

He blinked to shut down the feed.

His internal chrono told him he had been in stasis for over a year. Longer than the last time. His suit systems were almost depleted, despite their low power setting. Partial sus-an meditation for so long had left him groggy, but something had woken him.

The others were waking too, alerted by the same instinct. Obek watched the dull flare of their retinal lenses as their power armour reactivated.

Then he felt it. A dull scratching against the hull. Distant. It must be inside the outer armour but close enough that the resonance of it had been

picked up by his autosenses.

Something was inside, and trying to reach further into the ship, slowly worming its way towards the core.

Obek had his back to the door of a second chamber, an inner sanctum close to the cold forges of the ship.

He reached for his weapons, shattering the void-frost encasing his armour in a slow cascade of ice crystals. His voice was no louder than a croak, but the warning still carried weight.

‘More are coming.’

THE BROKEN CHALICE

The squad moved slowly through the silent ship, their armour sealed against the vacuum and the slow return of their rebreathers audible in their helms.

Brother-Sergeant Ko'tan had been dispatched when Adeptus Mechanicus Explorators had found the stricken vessel drifting amidst a debris field of other broken starships. A degrading gravity well exerted by one of the moons on the Fringe, too weak to draw the ships down but strong enough to hold them in state for a while, had captured it, and upon discovering the vessel's provenance, the magos in charge of the mission had immediately sent a message to Prometheus.

Ko'tan and his brothers had arrived a few weeks later, translating out of warp at the nearest Mandeville point and reaching the debris field a few days after that.

'*Evidence of prior incursion,*' Voskar's voice hissed with static as it came across the feed.

A beacon signature, faint but readable was emanating from somewhere deep within the ship.

'I have desiccated corpses here,' answered Ko'tan as he entered a barrack hall, the tread of his Terminator armour strangely light in the zero-gravity conditions as he briefly released the mag-lock securing him to the deck.

'*Origin?*'

'Xenos. Eldar and greenskin.'

'*Genestealer?*'

'Negative.'

'*Be wary, brother. This is their habitat.*'

Ko'tan sent an affirmative and moved on.

He passed through another corridor, partly laid open to the void. Parts of the ship were in dire need of repair but the superstructure was intact. All its systems were dead, and looked to have failed several years ago, but any accurate reading on that was impossible.

One of his squad from further back in the ship requested an interrogative. As he passed through the corridor and into a relic hall, Ko'tan panned his storm bolter across the darkness and blink-clicked an affirmative.

‘*Metallurgy samples secured, brother-sergeant.*’

Ko’tan paused in front of a great glyph of a drake that was staring down at him from the end of a vast hall. He knew the ship was old, but Ubon would know more.

‘Your findings, Techmarine?’

‘*Cursory analysis puts the ship at almost ten thousand years old,*’ Ubon replied.

K’o’tan’s breath caught for a moment, and he dared to hope. It was ornate, and unlike any vessel he had ever seen – and not on account of its age.

Something up ahead got his attention. Another door, immense and inscribed with the same drake sigil. It towered above Ko’tan, and he was still fifty feet away from it. They were deep in the bowels of the vessel now, near the extinct forges revealed in the initial scan before incursion.

A figure stood before the door.

As he drew closer, almost hypnotised by each fresh discovery, Ko’tan saw the door had been breached.

‘*Squad Ko’tan converge on vanguard.*’

More corpses littered the hall, a great many congregating outside the door in spite of the zero gravity. They floated in a strange swarm, a host of alien dead, but it wasn’t this which had drawn Ko’tan’s eye. Through the frozen bodies, their armour and void-suits torn open and gouged, he saw fireborn.

Their armour was old, far older than any he had ever seen. Even the captain’s artificer armour only dated back to the Arising. These suits were archaic.

They would need to reach the bridge and access the data-log to be certain, but as he gazed upon his long-dead brothers from another era, frozen solid in their armour, their defence having failed only when they had, he began to believe.

Ko’tan opened up the vox again.

‘Lord Vulkan…’ he intoned.

‘*Speak.*’

Dir’san’s icon put him in close proximity to the bridge.

‘I have found them, Forgefather.’

‘*Hold position. I am coming to you.*’

‘The second vault?’

‘*Empty.*’

‘This is the ship, Vulkan Dir’san,’ said Ko’tan. ‘It must be.’

‘*Yes*,’ said the Forgefather. ‘*The* Chalice of Fire *and* Eye of Vulkan *are here. We have but seven more to find*.’

AFTERWORD

After three novels, three novellas (one of which is actually a short novel, but let's just say 'novella' for ease of reference) and several short stories, the saga of the Salamanders in the Horus Heresy and their primarch, Vulkan, is drawing to a close.

It has been a privilege to write these characters, especially Vulkan. He was once little more than a footnote in the history of the Horus Heresy, but has, I feel, been elevated to his rightful prominence alongside his more famous brothers. Ever since I first encountered the Lord of Drakes, I've found his (and his Legion/Chapter's) story utterly compelling. His humanity makes him unique and it's immensely gratifying and humbling to see the fans of the series respond with the same passion and excitement I have for this primarch and the Salamanders. I wanted to *define* his story and judging by the reaction of you, dear reader, I have succeeded.

This volume, the somewhat broadly titled *Born of Flame*, is a collection of what I'd regard as the side material. By now, unless you've skipped to the end to read this afterword, you'll have read *Promethean Sun*, *Scorched Earth* and *Sons of the Forge* as well as the two short stories 'Immortal Duty' and 'Artefacts' that precede it.

I'm often asked where these novellas and short stories fit into the Salamanders/Vulkan story, so it's probably worth discussing the reading order before going into any detail. Chronologically, *Promethean Sun* comes first, then *Scorched Earth*. Although, technically, parts of *Vulkan Lives* take place before this novella, it covers a fairly broad swathe of time, so I'd recommend reading this post-*Scorched Earth* (a moot point, I know, if you've read some or all of this material already, but purists do like to know and then re-read – you're welcome). Then you should read *Vulkan Lives*, followed by *Deathfire*, then the short stories 'Artefacts' and 'Immortal Duty', and finish with *Sons of the Forge* and *Old Earth*. At the time of writing this afterword, there is one further short story called 'Mercy of the Dragon'. This fits into the *Promethean Sun* 'period' (more on this below) and should be read after this novella but before *Scorched Earth*.

Promethean Sun was my first Horus Heresy project. I didn't have a plan outside of the story itself. *Vulkan Lives* was still a little way off, and I was nervous about doing anything above and beyond the self-containment of the novel, so I kept the narrative and the characters on an extremely tight leash. It's a Great Crusade-era story, at least in part, with a side story that explores Vulkan's origins. The latter were well established in the canon, so in this I felt I had a guide rope to navigate the slightly tricky terrain. Given my trepidation and desire to play it safe with this story, I am surprised and delighted with how much it connects to what has followed.

I wasn't sure I'd ever revisit Caldera again, though during the writing of the synopsis to *Vulkan Lives* I considered making it the place where Vulkan emerges after using the teleportation device in *Dawnbringer*. In the end that plan got shelved as we began to develop the *Unremembered Empire* storyline and Macragge felt like a more natural and dramatic fit for a place to emerge and thus bring Vulkan into the current developing narrative. Even after I aborted my initial plans for weaving *Promethean Sun* and Caldera into the novels, I still had a desire to make it significant. It wasn't until *Old Earth* that I had my chance, and that section of Vulkan's storyline takes place on the world of Caldera that the Salamanders bring to compliance in *Promethean Sun*. It also features in one of The Beast Arises novels, *The Hunt for Vulkan* (by the excellent David Annandale). I was thrilled that David kept Caldera in the book and it's fascinating to see this little piece of lore persist across several titles, especially after so many years.

Scorched Earth is very much set in what I regard as the core of the Horus Heresy. It's focused on the aftermath of arguably the most defining moment in the Salamanders' history, the Dropsite Massacre on Isstvan V. Ever since I'd read about this event in the timeline, I wanted to write about it. Alas, I came along too late in the Horus Heresy series to write a straight up Isstvan V novel as Graham McNeill had already handled that so well in *Fulgrim*. The massacre does feature in *Vulkan Lives*, primarily to set up the actual story, and I was able to bring back some of the Pyre Guard from *Promethean Sun*, albeit only to be variously killed or maimed during the battle. *Scorched Earth* then was my chance to tell a hard war story, but rather than focus on the battle, I described what happened after it. It's a small story, in that it focuses on a group of survivors – some Salamanders, Iron Hands and Raven Guard who get left behind but have managed to escape death. It is purposefully grim, and I sought to evoke a WWI vibe with its trenches,

barbed wire and appalling loss of life. Of course, being a Salamanders story, it has a mythic element to it, and one best savoured before reading *Vulkan Lives*. Some of the characters in it feature in later stories, one of which, 'Unforged', is written by Guy Haley. Guy wrote a note to me after *Scorched Earth* was published, saying how much he enjoyed the story and asked if he could use some of the characters for a short story of his own. I was extremely flattered and, of course, agreed. *Scorched Earth* has an almighty twist, one you've probably discovered for yourself by now, but I didn't have the idea for it until very late on in the writing process. I'd almost finished the novella, in fact, when it came to me and I went back over the entire manuscript and sort of retrofitted it for the new ending. Although it wasn't an Isstvan V novel, *Scorched Earth* did allow me to explore the themes of this setting, the sense of loss, of despair, the cost of war to a person's humanity, even one that might be considered superhuman.

Whereas *Promethean Sun* began the journey and I wrote *Scorched Earth* out of a long-held desire, *Sons of the Forge* came directly out of the narrative. It was written to fit between *Deathfire* and *Old Earth*, and is part of the Age of Darkness era. It could have been a novel, but ended up as a sort of in-between hybrid. It's utterly self-contained, though does have characters in it that feature in *Deathfire* specifically, the faction known as the 'Unscarred' who had been on Nocturne (and, by extension, Prometheus) ever since the war began. They're led by a character who is mentioned in the older lore, T'kell, a master of the forge who becomes the first Forgefather of the Salamanders. This is my Dirty Dozen story, the special mission undertaken by a band of heroes who desperately want to earn some honour and dignity before the war's end. It came out of the idea of the artefacts of Vulkan, the so-called 'Nine'. I'd already written the short story 'Artefacts' that delved a little into this territory and sought to present a more realistic version of events from which the later ten-thousand-year old myth could spring; *Sons of the Forge* tells the story of what happened after. It connects to the other short story in this volume too, 'Immortal Duty', and serves as a lengthy coda to the Iron Hands characters who feature in it. My original intention was to include the Iron Hands narrative from *Sons of the Forge* in *Deathfire* but time and space would not allow. Thankfully, I got another opportunity and with some repurposing and reshaping, it became the core around which the drama and tension in *Sons of the Forge* could revolve.

This tension highlights something that's germane to all three of these novellas. For years, I've been writing about the Salamanders, but I've also been writing about the Iron Hands. They feature prominently in *Promethean Sun* – the compliance is a joint one (it also includes the Death Guard, but we'll never get to see that story; the Iron Hands' part is covered in the novella 'Feat of Iron', which is also a part of *The Primarchs* collection) and they also have a meaty role to play in *Scorched Earth*, and are actually the chief antagonists in *Sons of the Forge*.

The relationship between these two Legions and their primarchs is really at the heart of this series within a series. So much so in fact that there were plans afoot for an Iron Hands-focused novel called *The Iron Tenth*. It never came about, because of scheduling, a desire for momentum and all of the things that can sometimes happen in a long-running series like the Horus Heresy. Much of what was to be in that novel ended up in *Old Earth*, and I think it's a better, more well-rounded novel for it.

The fact remains that there's a streak of iron within the flame of the Salamanders Legion, which feels appropriate in that you can't have a forge without fire or without metal. One feels very much like a concomitant part of the other, and so it is with the stories in *Born of Flame*, which, in retrospect, could equally have been called *Born of Flame and Iron*…

Nick Kyme
Nottingham, 2018

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Old Earth*, *Deathfire*, *Vulkan Lives* and *Sons of the Forge*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio dramas *Red-Marked* and *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnos*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal* and the Age of Sigmar story 'Borne by the Storm', included in the novel *War Storm*. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

An extract from *Wolfsbane*.

EXTRACT
ORUS HERESY
Guy Haley
WOLFSBANE
The wyrd spear cast
The Wolf King enacts a desperate plan to slay Horus and end the threat to Terra before it can begin.

Of all the surviving members of Malcador's Chosen sent to Molech, Garviel Loken was the last to be called to the Wolf King's presence. Macer Varren and Proximo Tarchon had been summoned first. Ares Voitek had been woken for a while from his healing sleep to attend upon the primarch of the Space Wolves, and the human Rahua revealed reluctantly that even he had been to the *Hrafnkel*. His reluctance was understandable. A mere human was given such a great honour before Garviel Loken, agent Alpha-Prime of the Knights Errant. Loken was left on Titan and wondering if his lack of summons were a good or a bad thing.

Loken spent the waiting time wisely. There were things to do. There were always things to do, not least submitting to endless interrogations by Malcador's agents. The questioning was understandable. He had been in the presence of the Warmaster, his gene-father. As the interrogations occupied only a portion of his days, he was permitted to take up his duties between interviews. These occupied a portion more.

He still had too much time on his hands.

The mind of a legionary is capacious, and despite his allotted tasks, there remained plenty of space for doubt: why had he not been brought before Russ?

When the call finally came it was a relief, although he knew there was a chance the meeting could end in his death.

He came from Titan by fast ship to Terra's orbit. He rode on the command deck all the way, clad in his armour as if he were heading into battle, standing beside the command throne so motionless and stern he seeded disquiet among the small crew.

The ship cut over the plane of the ecliptic. Mars and Terra were in opposition. The lights of the ships blockading the red planet made it seem that there were a dozen worlds attended by a hundred additional moons.

Constant vox-chatter whispered from the comms stations. Sol's void space was crammed with starships. Activity in the system had reached a fever pitch. Now the warp storms had begun to abate, Dorn anticipated Horus would launch an attack soon, and so the home system of mankind prepared feverishly for battle.

Terra appeared as a star at first, a singular albedo shine that split into dozens then hundreds of lesser lights as Loken's ship approached. Russ' ships were moored at the high anchor halo of resupply stations and dry

docks, where the battered remnants of the VI and V Legions' once mighty fleets underwent hurried repairs.

Codes were transmitted and received. Without slowing, the cutter headed directly for the largest ship, a Gloriana-class behemoth swaddled in mending frames, closely overlapped like bandages over its wounds.

The *Hrafnkel*, Leman Russ' flagship and one of the most powerful vessels in the whole galaxy.

They touched down on the embarkation deck. Loken was away before the engines had finished their cooling cycle.

A clamour of industry roared into the cutter as the gang ramp descended. Clattering metal and machine tool whines and the grinding shrieks of blades cutting into plasteel assaulted Loken's hearing. The stink of burning metal filled the place end to end, vast though it was. Sparks fountained in arcs like geysers of lava. Sheets of plastek as tall as Titan banners wafted in hot breezes blowing from the ship's depths. Menials in the heavy environment suits of the Terran Stevedores and Shipwrights Guilds were at work everywhere, aided by barbarous-looking Fenrisian menials who wore primitive leather masks beneath their visors. Loken halted at the base of the cutter's ramp to avoid a heavy repair rig rumbling down the embarkation deck's central road. The servitor drivers wired into the cab stared blankly ahead. A group of Mechanicum adepts followed, directing the machine by means of a remote control box implanted into the chest of a vast brute who was linked to the cogitators aboard by a long, flexed umbilicus covered in rubberised plastek.

The machine chugged past, and Loken set foot upon oily deck plating. The place was so gloomy he thought there was a malfunction in the lighting circuits, but as he looked into the cathedral spaces of the deck he saw chandeliers with every lumen globe intact. It was purposefully dim.

As his eyes adjusted he saw how badly damaged the *Hrafnkel* was. Repair gangs and heavy plant took the place of gunships and drop pods in the landing circles. Men shouted. Metal scaffold poles were dumped by a hauler, clanging to the deck in a raucous bell peal. Since his return to Terra, Russ had not been idle. He had been out patrolling the Solar reaches beyond the outermost defence sphere. He had ventured beyond the system and fought the campaign at Daverant Reach and the battle at Vanaheim. If he did those things in this wreck, thought Loken, he must be as reckless as they say.

A cohort of dry dock workers jogged in front of him, faceplates misted with breath, brass boots thudding on metal. When they had passed Loken saw a savage figure staring at him across the main roadway of the embarkation deck. He had not been there before.

He was a legionary, that much was certain, but so barbarously dressed only his size and his bearing separated him from the lesser men in their furs and leathers labouring alongside the Terran work gangs. A wolf pelt hung from heavy silver brooches set at his shoulders. The skin lay over a full suit of close-fitting leather that covered him head to toe. The dozens of expertly cut panels mimicked the exposed musculature of a flayed man. It was the brown of flesh left to desiccate in dry highlands. Armour was a generous word for it. The leather was hard, but too full of joins and easy holes for swords to find to offer real protection, and would give none at all against more advanced weapons. But it was impressive. Firelight caught on the edges, gleaming off the involute knotwork covering every part. A mask fashioned into a bestial muzzle hid the warrior's face. Eyes glinted in the darkness beneath. The flash of a hunting beast's eyes from the thicket before a furred weight bears you to the ground and hot breath heralds death.

The figure approached. Loken instinctively braced for combat.

The warrior's red beard parted to show fanged teeth, and he laughed.

'My friend!' said the warrior. 'You are a little edgy today. I bid you welcome to the *Hrafnkel*, flagship and domain of Leman Russ, the Great Wolf, the Wolf King, the Lord of Winter and War!'

Confusion overtook Loken.

'Bror Tyrfingr, is that you?'

'Aye, who did you expect?' Bror slapped Loken hard on his pauldron. 'The Allfather Himself?' Bror held out his hand. Loken took his forearm. Leather glove gripped ceramite plate. 'It is good to see you, Loken.'

'When you left Titan, I thought you might never come back. I see I was right.' Loken gestured at Tyrfingr's leather suit. 'You are leaving us then,' he said. 'To rejoin your master.'

'No, no, my friend,' said Bror. 'I was commanded by my king to join Malcador's private army, and there I will remain until told otherwise. My loyalty is to the regent now. He is my *jarl*,' he said, the foreign word a wet, guttural growl in his throat. 'But Leman of the Russ will forever be my primarch. He is my father. I visit with him to renew bonds of kinship and fealty, and to discuss the coming attack upon the Warmaster. I will return to

Malcador's side soon enough. We shall fight together again, you and I, I swear it.'

Loken suspected Bror had returned to report on his new master to his old. Russ had a hunger for intelligence that matched Malcador's. He refrained from saying so.

'Why are you dressed in that way?'

'Ha!' Bror slapped the leather panels covering his iron-hard stomach. 'Like a member of the *Vlka Fenryka* you mean?'

'This is what Space Wolves wear?'

'When we are among our own, aye.' Tyrfingr glanced up. 'My friend, I advise you, only those not of Fenris use the term "Space Wolf".'

'I apologise if I disrespect you,' said Loken.

There had always been bonds of brotherhood between the different Legions. The Space Wolves defied them in their oddness. They were a breed apart, as isolated as the Khan's White Scars, and more savage. They were made of the same raw matter, Loken and Tyrfingr, but the mould they were stamped from was so very different.

'If I took offence at that,' said Bror, 'I would have to commit to feud with the entire galaxy. Just try not to say "Space Wolf" aboard this ship. You will seem ignorant. The Rout does not take kindly to ignorance, and they will not take you seriously.'

They left the embarkation deck by a set of large doors and headed upwards into the ship. Loken had been aboard many Gloriana-class vessels. They were all of a pattern, but the Space Wolves had made the ship their own as much as they possibly could, tearing it bloodily from the grasp of reason and refashioning it in their own, superstitious tribal image. Other Legions favoured polished stone, gleaming metal and glass to line their halls. The Space Wolves covered the metal walls with carved wood and bone sheets so large they could only have been harvested from monsters. The greater halls had elaborate interiors of wolf-headed posts and panelling decorated with entwined beasts whose contortions inevitably ended in the fanged mouths of their fellows. Even lesser ways too unimportant for wholesale decoration acknowledged the character of the Legion: mossy rocks in bubbling pools of water, bunches of dried herbs tied up in bundles hanging from the ceiling, primitive weapons chained to the walls, as if imprisoned.

For all its size, the *Hrafnkel* had the atmosphere of a chieftain's hall. The air was scented with smoke and poorly preserved meat, herbs, burned fat, wet fur, and the hot, musky smell of animals sleeping in their dens.

Its corridors were as likely to be lit by flickering torches as they were lumen strips or biolume panels. Fire bowls guttered in the suction winds of atmospheric recyc units, the walls behind them furred with soot.

'You like it dark,' said Loken.

'Too much light dulls the senses,' said Bror. 'If you think this is dark, you would hate the *Aett*.' Another phlegm-rich word, more growled than spoken. If the Fenrisian language had a relationship to Imperial Gothic, it was obscure.

'The what?'

Tyrfingr chuckled throatily. 'The Fang. They call it the Fang. Only don't say that either. It's the Aett, or nothing.'

The illusion of a savage king's demesne would have been total had it not broken in many places, showing the technology beneath. Patchwork repairs made after Alaxxes had been undone by the ship's recent forays beyond the Solar perimeter. New scars piled atop old wounds; the ship was damaged through and through. Whole sections were sealed off. Drifts of wood ash intermingled with mortals' bones where fires had broken through bulkheads and torched compartments. In other sections, the Space Wolves' primitive cladding had been ripped out to enable access to the guts of the ship. Beating hammers had the *Hrafnkel* shivering with a fever's trembles. It was a giant beast, wounded close to death. It would be decades before it was brought back to its full capabilities.

Loken had heard Leman Russ intended to leave within the week.

Tyrfingr took Loken further into the ship, and the damage became less apparent, though it was never entirely absent. They ascended damp stairways and lifters whose mechanisms struggled against shafts bent out of true. After a time they reached the spinal way, the great stem-to-stern thoroughfare that all grand starships possessed.

Even there, below the towering windows, where a transit monorail ran with shushing haste, and ornate gates led to the palaces of astrotelepathy, astrogation, weapons control, the enginarium and other vasty domains, the sense of a primitive settlement remained strong. Every few hundred metres carved menhirs, their bases still dirty with alien soil, stood sentinel in recesses which in other Legions' ships statues might occupy. Loken had seen

few of Bror's brothers until they reached the spinal way, where they thronged in some numbers. Most wore segmented leather costumes and masks. They were similar to Bror's in the broadest sense, but no patterns were the same. Each was a unique expression of the warrior encased inside. The leather suits were more individual to each man than a human face. Fantastic beasts fashioned from hide stared at Loken as he walked by, and he felt out of place in his clean, grey power armour. Those few legionaries wearing their war gear were hardly less outlandish, for the storm-grey battleplate was decorated with twisting patterns, hammered runes, ropes of teeth, and the tips of wolf tails mounted in cast, angular brasses.

Bror took Loken aboard a crew train crammed with thralls. Many of them wore costumes as heavily decorated as those of their masters, and Loken guessed these were the higher ranking *kaerls* of the Chapter. The monorail accelerated mercilessly, turning the spinal way to a blur.

They reached the command spire soon after, and headed on towards the Wolf's Hall, Leman Russ' throneroom.

The long defensive corridor leading to the hall was lined solely with enormous sheets of ivory. The place was populated by the *Varagyr*, who other men called the Wolf Guard. These heavily decorated Space Wolves Veterans stood guard outside the hall, though Loken would have applied that term only loosely, because they did not stand at rigid attention, but congregated in clumps of two or three, talking with each other in the uncouth Fenrisian tongue as loudly as revellers, seemingly inattentive to their task. Not even their livery had any consistency to it. The Legion badge of a red, snarling wolf upon the heraldry plate of the left pauldron was the only commonality. In other places of prominence Loken saw double-headed wolves, rearing wolves, howling wolves and all manner of wolves besides.

'My lord does not stand on ceremony,' whispered Bror, seeing the look on Loken's face. 'We don't do parades.'

'I see,' said Loken.

'Better to be loyal and a little rough than polished drillmasters with treacherous hearts, eh?' Bror said.

His words came across as a direct challenge, until Bror elbowed Loken and grinned. His elbow thudded off plasteel. Even though Loken wore his own armour, he was glad Bror wasn't wearing battleplate.

'These here are the Wolf Guard of the *Einherjar*, the jarl's inner circle. They are here to honour you. All this is for your benefit.' Bror raised a hand

and grinned at a fellow of his. The warrior was dressed in his power armour without his helm, and had his face covered by a leather mask like Bror's. He nodded in response.

'I am honoured,' said Loken.

'You should be,' said Bror.

Loken was sincere. He *was* honoured. Once he would have dismissed the force as savages, regarding his own Legion as far superior. That was before the Luna Wolves had become the Sons of Horus, and the Sons of Horus had become traitors. Russ' wolves, the true wolves, had proved the more faithful.

They passed through the throng of warriors, having to beg pardon so they could go between them. There was no sense of discipline to them at all, but Loken knew this concealed a terrifying prowess in war.

Braziers gave off a suffocating heat. Firebowls burned animal oils that furred the ceiling with fatty deposits. At the far end of the corridor huge, circular ivory doors barred the way. A serpent ran around the outside, framing in its circle of scales a tempestuous sea crammed with monsters and foundering wooden ships. The serpent's mouth was clamped firmly around its own tail. Loken recognised the ouroboros, the ancient symbol of eternity, but he had never seen a representation like this before.

'Bror Tyrfingr!' roared a bearded giant. He wore a leather suit like Bror's and smelled like the cave of a hibernating bear. He grappled Bror, a half-wrestle, half-embrace that had the pair of them staggering about the corridor. Loken was forced to step back to avoid their boisterous greeting. The men grunted as they pushed at each other, before collapsing into laughter and hugging fiercely.

'Ah, brother Loken,' said Bror, his arm hung around the shoulders of the warrior. 'This is Varagyr Kettril Modinsson, called Dourface, of the retinue of Hvarl Red-Blade, the Jarl of Sepp.'

Kettril gave Loken a massive, infectious smile. 'The lone wolf,' he said. He held out his arm. Loken took it, only to be pulled into an embrace he would rather have avoided. He got a mouthful of musty pelt before Kettril released him.

'It is a privilege to meet you, brother, wolf to wolf,' said Kettril.

'I have no brotherhood, not anymore,' said Loken, a statement that caused Kettril to pull him close again.

'Never say that again,' Kettril whispered. 'We are all wolves of the Emperor here. If you find yourself lacking in a good warrior to watch your

back,’ he nodded his head towards Bror in jest, ‘you can call on me. This I swear by the fires of the world forge.’

‘I thank you,’ said Loken, unsure of what to say.

‘The Einherjar have gathered to the Wolf King,’ said Kettril to Bror. ‘Speak clearly and with pride,’ he said to Loken. ‘And leave nothing out.’

Kettril whistled shrilly between his teeth. The doors opened. Beneath the ivory cladding were standard adamantium blast doors, thick and proud as those of any ship. This epitomised the Space Wolves, Loken thought. The deception of iron hidden under primitivism.

‘Go on then,’ said Kettril. ‘Do not keep the Lord of Winter and War waiting.’

The hall beyond was huge, but the number of warriors and the way they clustered in its centre made it seem small and intimate. The heights of the ceiling were lost in smoky darkness. A few lancet windows let in enough of Terra’s earthshine to reveal the carved monsters lurking at the tops of pillars. Loken wished they had remained hidden. They reminded him of unclean things he had seen aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*.

Firebowls and resinous torches were the sole sources of light. Tiny lumen indicators on power armour blinked in the dismal hall, shifting like sparks as their bearers moved. Tyrfingr pushed his way to the front through two score feral warriors. There were lords there aplenty, and other Legiones Astartes sporting primitive bone charms over their power armour who could only have been Leman Russ’ famed priests. Many of the company wore the Rout’s strange leather masks. A couple had helms fashioned in the shape of wolf skulls. The masks danced in the flickering light, making the hall appear like an underworld populated by lost gods. Only a handful of the warriors were barefaced, but they looked as uncanny and fierce as the others.

Upon a throne of bones sat the Wolf King. Bror led Loken towards the primarch without ceremony. Men were coming and going from various smaller doors in the sides of the hall, and the primarch paid no attention to his visitor until he was announced.

‘My jarl!’ Bror called, shoving past a black-armoured barbarian. ‘I have him, I have brought you the last loyal Luna Wolf!’

Approaching the Wolf King was like striding towards a storm. The light changed. The air changed. Subtle pressures played upon little-used senses, those that warned of impending misfortune. They were the senses that told a woman her son was lost in battle, that alerted a child to the danger hiding in

the dark. The world became a different place in the presence of Russ, less certain, more primal. Stepping close to him was to step back in time to man's distant past, when fire kept beasts from the cave, and every boulder had a name.

Russ broke off his conversation with his advisers and surged to his feet.

'Fenrys hjolda!' he shouted. 'Garviel Loken, back from the den of the arch traitor himself. You are not as dim as I thought if you survived that expedition!' His taunt was delivered with a smile. 'Come to me, loyal son of the Emperor.'

To have Russ turn his full attention on you was like attracting the personal enmity of a storm. Barely less imposing were the enormous wolves flanking his throne, one black, the other silver. Their majesty beggared belief; it was hard to imagine creatures such as they existing at all outside the mind of a dramaturge. The head of the smaller – and it was only ever so slightly smaller – would have reached Loken's shoulders if it stood. They stared at him through narrowed yellow eyes. The black curled its lips, showing fangs more like swords than teeth. Upon its head was a bald patch of knotted pink scar.

He dearly wished it would not stand.

Though the name of his beloved, dishonoured Legion evoked creatures like them, Loken did not like these wolves.

On the wall behind Russ was hung a large spear. A haft as thick as a comms array's sounding pole terminated in a sculpture of a snarling wolf. From the mouth protruded a sword-long, leaf-headed blade of shining gold. Fine knotwork crawled all over the plated plasteel. Slung under the wolf's body was the vented box of a disruption field generator, the power transmission cabling and field dispersal studs cunningly hidden by the decoration. There were subtler technologies woven into the blade besides. It was a psy weapon, a thing of the Lord of Mankind, come out of His forges and suffused with His mastery of science and the warp. Even inactive, it gave off a particular feel, a resonant echo of the Emperor's presence, that bred unease and filled the hearts of men with dark foreboding.

Leman Russ hated it. Somehow, Loken could tell that. Russ leaned away from where it hung. It was situated too far from his throne for him to seize to defend himself, whereas his other weapons, his giant-sized bolter and monstrous frost blade, were close to hand. More than once the Wolf King glanced at it sidelong, as if he did not trust it to remain where it was.

Bror Tyrfingr knelt at the feet of his lord, the sole true sign of deference Loken had witnessed thus far in his time upon the *Hrafnkel*.

‘Get up, Bror,’ boomed Russ, waving his hand widely. ‘I won’t have Loken here trotting back to the old man and describing my sons as grovelling wretches.’ He grinned savagely at Loken. ‘You will be reporting, won’t you? That sly old hound has his eyes everywhere.’

‘So do you, I think,’ said Loken.

Russ smiled at Bror. ‘We have nothing to hide in the Rout, eh, my sons? Tell Malcador what you like. Perhaps if you do he might stop bothering me with his questions.’

Shouts and mutters of agreement sounded from around the room. Loken estimated there to be a hundred or so warriors in the hall. Not only Russ’ council of jarls and his priests, but the Legion’s equivalents of Chaplains, Forge Marines and Apothecaries also. Without his helm display he could not be sure. He doubted he would have dared activate it even if he had his helmet on. The Wolves might have overreacted to the clumsy, unintended slight of a curious augur sounding.

‘Someone get this man a seat!’ said Russ. ‘And some *mjod*!’

A chair was produced. Russ gestured that Loken should sit. A bronze drinking horn was passed into his hands. At Russ’ urging Loken sipped the liquid. It burned his mouth, his throat and his stomach in succession with a flavour like engine oil mixed with acid. He stifled a cough. The drink would kill a mortal human.

‘Good, yes?’ said Bror. All the Space Wolves – the ones whose mouths he could see – were grinning at his discomfort.

‘It is not to my taste, my lord primarch,’ said Loken diplomatically.

‘Ah, give it a few more sips,’ said Russ. His accent was thicker than when Loken had last met him – the only time he had met him – in Malcador’s Himalazian retreat. The primarch dropped back into his throne. He made a show of not caring what people thought of him, but it was a show. Malcador had told him that. ‘It gets better the more you drink. It took the warriors of Fenris only a few years to develop a liquor that will intoxicate a legionary quickly, but we spent many years in perfecting it. Go on.’ Russ raised his hand and waved it again. ‘A big gulp this time. Mjod is not for sipping.’

Loken hid his misgivings and took a mouthful of the liquid. He suppressed a splutter. The burning was less pronounced this time. His

adapted stomach clenched against the mjod, but he held it in, and after a moment a pleasant warmth spread through his belly.

‘Good?’ said Russ. His smile was all pointed teeth. They did not fit with the primarch’s clean-shaven face. It was rarely commented on, but Russ was a handsome being, though his features tended to the blunt and he had many scars. All the primarchs were made to be perfect, but some of them, Fulgrim and Sanguinius in particular, were more beautiful than others to begin with. Leman Russ was handsome in his way, if one looked past his furs and his manner. Loken wondered how many people ever did.

‘Well then, you know why you are here,’ said Russ. ‘Let’s get on with it.’

‘You wish to hear of our mission.’

‘I do. All of it. Start at the beginning.’

‘From the beginning?’

‘That’s what I said, isn’t it? See, Bjorn,’ said Russ to a saturnine, dark-haired warrior stood at the left of his throne. ‘I told you this one was slow.’

‘Forgive me, my lord, have you not had Bror and the others tell you of what occurred?’ asked Loken.

Russ rolled his head until his neck cracked. ‘Ach, he has, he has! They have! I made them all start at the beginning, and I want to hear your version of events the same way. It’s important. From hearing all accounts, the *skjalds*,’ he pointed out a mixed group of standard humans and legionaries stood at the side of the room, ‘will fashion a telling of events that will be sung into the sagas of the Legion. An Adeptus Astartes legionary might remember better than a human, but he is still fallible. In collective remembrance, a truer account can be found.’ Russ kicked his feet out and sprawled further into his throne. ‘So go on, speak. Tell me of your adventure.’

So Loken spoke. He told of how he and Malcador’s Knights Errant had infiltrated Horus’ flagship, the *Vengeful Spirit*, at the height of the Battle of Molech. With a heavy heart he relayed the tally of the dead, how one by one noble heroes had been snatched from life, until finally they had been captured, and taken before Horus himself.

‘Five of eleven of us died, my lord,’ he said. ‘Three of the others were mortally wounded. If it had not been for Banu Rassuah’s actions, we would all have died, or worse.’ He looked down, unable to hold the eye of the primarch. ‘We were caught before we could map the *Vengeful Spirit* fully. I expressed my regret to Bror that we failed the task you set us.’

‘We did not fail,’ said Bror. ‘I have said this to you. A lot.’

‘And I have said a hundred times, my brother, that I cannot agree.’ Loken held up his hands apologetically. His pauldrons shifted back on their mountings with a soft hiss. Only in the silence of Russ’ hall, where the assembled lords of the Space Wolves listened so attentively, could such a quiet little sound be heard. ‘I am sorry, but it is true. How can we call what we did a success?’

Russ breathed heavily, deep in thought. ‘Success, no success. Bah. Tell me more of my brother. Tell me how powerful he seemed.’

Loken stumbled over his words. He could not quite believe what had become of the Warmaster, and his tongue rebelled when he tried to put it into words. ‘He has changed, my lord. Completely. The primarch Horus Lupercal has become an abomination. Something has happened to him. I… I have never been in the presence of such power.’ He paused after that statement, fearing it might appear that he held some loyalty for the Warmaster. Nothing could be further from the truth.

‘Do you believe my brother has been overthrown by some malign intelligence?’ asked Russ. ‘I have heard reports that he has been corrupted, and that his thoughts are not his own.’

Was there hope in Russ’ voice? That Horus the Great, the Emperor’s finest son, was not to blame for what was happening?

Malcador had confided in Loken two things of import about the Wolf King. The first was that his barbarian king persona could be raised and lowered as easily as a visor; he was not the simple warrior lord he portrayed. The second was that he regretted what had happened on Prospero, and was stung at how he had been manipulated into it. It would be easier for him to accept that it was not his brother that had used him, but some other, eldritch thing. Russ might hope, Malcador said, that Horus could be saved, not only for Russ’ love for his brother, but for his own vindication.

Maybe it was both, maybe it was neither. Loken tried to read the true intentions of the Wolf King, employing tricks of observation Malcador’s agents had taught him, but he could not. He saw only a savage’s face, with a hierophant’s inscrutable gaze.

Loken quelled his frustration. He was destined to always be a blind weapon. It was not his place to judge a primarch.

‘Regrettably, no,’ said Loken, answering Russ’ question. ‘Whatever he has become, the Warmaster’s mind still rules his body. Lupercal’s ambition

drives him on. When he spoke with me, it was Horus who tried to sway me to his side again and not some Neverborn abomination, though the *Vengeful Spirit* hosts such things now. It was Horus who killed the Half-Heard, as if he were nothing.' He looked into Russ' piercing blue eyes, and was struck again by the intelligence he saw there. 'We have seen so many things we thought could not be true. Daemons, creatures of the warp infesting human flesh, gods perhaps, toying with the lives of men. But Horus lives. He was corrupted upon Davin by that blade, but I knew him when I saw him again. He could not have become this way were it not for his failings. Pride. Hubris. I thought primarchs beyond reproach, but I have learned that none of you are perfect. If Horus is a cat's paw, he is more a willing one than not.'

Russ shifted uneasily at Loken's words, like a wolf sensing something dangerous on the breeze. He could not deny the truths the Luna Wolf spoke, but even after all this, thought Loken, he still believes in the Emperor's infallible sons.

The Wolf King burst out laughing. 'Again you surprise me. You are a bold one, Garviel Loken, in being so honest. Now, the most important thing you must tell me.' Russ leaned forwards in his throne, his eyes narrowed. 'Can I kill him? Can I kill the Warmaster?' Before Loken could answer, Russ went on. 'In the old days, in the Crusade, I thought I could beat most of my brothers. Maybe not Sanguinius. In him there is a fine blend of skill and fury. He is a *baresark* in angel's garb. Or the Night Haunter, for he has the heedless power of the insane. But the others… Angron? He's too angry. Fulgrim?' He shrugged. 'Too proud. Perturabo and Dorn are too stolid. Guilliman is too stern to enjoy battle and so I would beat him too. Lorgar I could spit on and that would drop him into the dirt, he's so weak from all that kneeling. Alpharius is a wretched serpent. And we all know what happened to the great sorcerer of Prospero. The rest I could defeat as easily as this.' He snapped his fingers.

'Horus though,' he grimaced. 'Put to it, one on one, I could have beaten him. It would have been hard, and close fought, and had fortune favoured him over me, he would have triumphed. But the feat was within my grasp. So tell me, Garviel Loken, is it now? Can I still kill him?'

Loken's face tightened. Russ was proud, they said. He looked from the corners of his eyes at the wolf lords around him. Proud barbarians with an over-developed sense of honour were easy to insult. But they also said Russ was no fool.

Loken made his choice. ‘No,’ he said. ‘You cannot beat him. Not like he is now. I do not think anyone can, save perhaps the Emperor Himself.’

The Wolf King’s lips curved in thought and his eyes unfocused. He stroked idly at the pelt affixed to his shoulder. The bluff expression fell away, and for a moment Loken was witness to the man the Wolf King hid.

An instant later, the thoughtful man was gone, replaced by the smiling savage.

‘I thank you, Garviel Loken, for your honest counsel, but I assure you I will beat the Warmaster. I am going to have to.’

The audience was over. Russ stood. His wolves yawned, one after the other, the second wider than the first as they competed to see who could gape furthest.

‘Tell Malcador I shall be borrowing Bror here for a while. Don’t worry, I’ll bring him back, so long as his thread remains uncut,’ said Russ.

‘Yes, my lord. I shall report to the regent, then return. When do we leave?’

Russ frowned. ‘When do *we* leave? *We* do not leave, Garviel Loken.’ Russ pointed a grubby finger at him. ‘*You* are staying here.’

‘My lord, I beg of you,’ said Loken. He had a consuming desire to confront his father again. He wished to face him one more time, with no doubt in his heart. ‘Let me come. I have sworn an oath to defy the Warmaster to my dying breath. I want to be a part of this.’

Leman of the Russ shook his head. His copper-blond topknot swayed in the ship’s foul air.

‘Not you, you remain!’ he said sternly. Then he added softly, ‘I say to you from one wolf to another, this is not your fight. It is unwise to intrude into the feuds of brothers, as we say on Fenris. They are the bloodiest of all.’

Once more Russ’ smile dropped. ‘Do not be sad. You will have plentiful opportunity to face your gene-father,’ he said. ‘If you are right, and I cannot beat him, he will kill me then he will be coming here. Fight him then.’

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